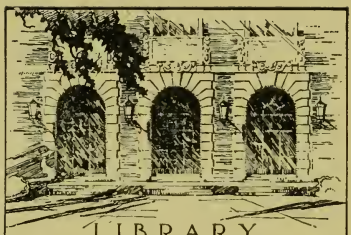
Mr. Bryant's Mistake



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MR. BRYANT'S MISTAKE

MR. BRYANT'S MISTAKE

BY

KATHARINE WYLDE

AUTHOR OF 'A DREAMER,' 'AN ILL-REGULATED MIND,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES—VOL. II

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'And the gusty winds waked the winged seeds
Out of their birthplace of ugly weeds,
Till they clung round many a sweet flower's stem.'

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MR. BRYANT'S MISTAKE

CHAPTER I

On the morrow of that eventful day every one had to pick up the thread of his life and go on as if nothing had happened.

Mrs. Leach gave her children and friends a wondrous account of her adventure on the line, and, to her great satisfaction, became credited with the family power of working miracles. For to keep the story in her own hands, as it were, she suppressed for the present all reference to the Tanswick beer-shop, to her anxious niece, and to the strong arm of Sir Vincent Leicester. In her version she had been overcome by a draught of Inspiredness; Nannie was her guardian angel grown visible; and Sir Vincent, the archangel Michael, with the body of Moses in his hand. Lizzie and some of the neighbours believed it all. Mrs. Leach wished no one to suspect she had been drinking; on no account would

she sign the pledge *to-day*, lest any connection should be guessed between the two events; but she inwardly decided, being alarmed by Alick's preaching and by her own adventure, that repentance and a new life had become absolutely necessary. So she put on her best clothes and a pious countenance, took her Bible in her hand, and went out to visit the poor.

Nannie gave no particulars of what had occurred. No one seemed curious on the subject, and she had no wish to be questioned about its sequel. None of these home people were in her confidence, and how could she make any one understand the wild joy that possessed her heart at the unexpected, the beautiful thing that had happened to her? He loved her; and they had kissed each other! Was it not enough to make her happy for the rest of her life? even though 'it came to nothing.' For Nannie could not see any way in which their love could get any further. While she had leaned on his breast on the moor-side, where they had been so nearly killed together, he had not seemed so very far away; but no sooner was she at home and darning her father's stockings, very silently with a pensive smile playing round her lips, than she recognised that she was in her right, her only place, and that, alas! there was no position in her sphere for *him*. The impossible was very sweet, but she dared not think that even a boarding school, or a

dancing-master, or Murray's Grammar (vague notions of which vulgarities were oppressing Vincent, and already casting a shadow on the delicate brightness of his sea-nymph), could ever make it attainable. 'But oh! I do *so* wish I had been a lady!' was the refrain of her cogitations; which had perhaps been sadder but for his ring burning her throat unseen; an earnest that he was going to speak to her just once more of love.

Alick, the holy martyr, had had time for reflection in the police-cell, where he lay awaiting the judgment of the Bench of Tanswick magistrates on his Attempted Suicide; then the snuffy old Mr. Sandford and his coadjutors sat upon him, and Sir Vincent and others appeared against him, but said they did not wish the charge pressed; so he was dismissed with a caution not to do it again, and Sir Vincent drove the martyr home in his own dogcart, trying to talk the matter over friendlily and reasonably, and finding Alick very respectful, very meek, and very obstinate.

'Will you read a few books on philosophy, Alick, if I give them to you?'

'No, sir, thank you kindly. "The world by wisdom knew not God."'

'But the world by wisdom knows itself. That is the beginning and end of philosophy.'

'Ay, sir; but I want something a bit higher than

myself. I am a worm and no man; my righteousnesses are filthy rags and my strength a shadow. You need not fear as the devil shall make me exalt myself, sir.' Vincent looked at the quiet sincere face not unadmiringly. He suggested that Alick should consult Mr. Bryant. But Alick heaved a sigh, and said sorrowfully—

'I pray God, sir, you ain't been thinking too highly of Mr. Bryant.'

At which Vincent waxed impatient, and said: 'Upon my soul, Alick, you think you are the only righteous man in the country!'

Alick was received by a dozen disciples, who followed him to his home and wherever he went; and in the evening he learned that a subscription had been started to support him for a fortnight, if he would leave his handicraft and devote himself to preaching and healing.

It may be imagined that Alick Randle, thus firmly seated on the prophetic stool, showed no disposition to relent towards Mr. Bryant, the liar; who had fought with seven devils, and had been worsted by them without his own knowledge. For the clergyman was not aware, once his spirits had revived with the certainty that no one had seen him run away and that Mrs. Leach and Nannie were safe in their homes, what a crisis that evening had been in his moral history. On the contrary, he believed himself come to

terms with his foe; certain things he would do and certain things he would not do; the devils were not to be too hard upon him, and make him a coward and a murderer because, for the sake of his dear wife and his showy daughter and his own gentility, some economy of the truth was necessary! Mr. Bryant thought himself altogether in the way of repentance; and so (as the miserable fanatic was not to be pacified in any other way) he one evening actually presented himself at the Heights to make to Sir Vincent a statement of facts. And as he stood in his patron's library, he looked all that was virtuous and Christian and gentleman-like. 'Tis unfortunate when the countenance involuntarily assumes merits the heart has not; the fact is sure to suggest a resource in season of difficulty.

Mr. Bryant's opening remarks about private affairs and discovery that his means of usefulness in Everwell were sadly crippled, were unenlightening, and indeed a little tedious to Vincent, who was thinking hard of his own matters, and building diligently castle after castle in impossible and unsafe regions of air.

'What is the man driving at?' he asked himself impatiently; and then he started, for the clergyman addressed him directly on the subject of Georgina; whose coming with her father to Everwell had been, under the circumstances, undesirable—most un-

desirable; and against Mr. Bryant's wish, though a matter of absolute necessity. 'But, my dear lad,' and the clergyman rose and put his arm through that of the unwilling Vincent, who, to his great annoyance, felt himself flushing, 'you must permit me, while we are on this subject, to say one word more. If you could only manage to ignore Georgie a bit! I fear my little woman will never learn to estimate rightly a certain piece of folly on your part last year, if you haven't the strength of mind to conceal your—what shall I say?—*admiration* for her better than this. Of course I know,' continued Mr. Bryant, with his air of dignified humility, 'that you have recognised the sense of my objections to your proposals last year; but I am getting seriously afraid that you have not made this fact clear to Georgina, poor child; and besides it is not pleasant to me to have strangers remarking on your manner to her, and forming entirely erroneous opinions as to your intentions.'

Vincent was not sharp enough to discern Mr. Bryant's motive in thus accentuating his entanglement with Georgina before telling the detestable news; but he proved even more matter-of-fact and stupid than the clergyman had wished; for he received the scolding in the letter and not in the spirit, made no attempt to combat his friend's 'objections' to his pretensions, and stammered some-

thing about 'regret' and 'amendment,' which was the very opposite of what Mr. Bryant had wished. And then there was a pause; and Vincent's thoughts flew back to Nannie again; and he ardently wished Mr. Bryant would go away.

'I must explain my position a little,' said the clergyman at last; 'your conduct to Georgina is not my only reason for wishing to leave Everwell.'

'But you mustn't leave Everwell,' cried Vincent, recovering his good humour; 'we should have Alick crowned Pope in a week!'

'You will be surprised,' continued Mr. Bryant; 'you will perhaps wonder that I have not told you before. But really, if it had not been for a most singular coincidence, I do not see that I should have mentioned the matter at all. I have found relations at Everwell, Sir Vincent.'

The clergyman's manner suggested something unpleasant; and the moment his *wife* was mentioned Vincent began to understand. Ah, his wife! People got into a convenient habit of ignoring Mrs. Bryant, but true, there she always was, large as life, and when one came to think of it, 'a little underbred.' And now Mr. Bryant went on: 'The fact is, my dear wife is not—well, I have no doubt you have perceived what I would say. She was a most beautiful, enchanting, excellent creature. Young men are romantic sometimes, as you are aware; and

must not complain when they are elderly, if their romantic actions entail certain little inconveniences. But I had no idea that I should find my brother-in-law, Benjamin Randle, living at Everwell.'

'Randle!' ejaculated Vincent, so much startled that a silence was necessary for both parties to arrange their thoughts. Mr. Bryant felt nearly mad with chagrin; for the young man's tone as he repeated the name seemed to him to say, 'That is far worse than I had expected.'

Of course it was not Vincent's thought. Nannie was the centre of his present being, and involuntarily he referred every word, every trivial event to its unseen connection with her. A feeling of positive relief and elation shot through him. If Nannie were related to such a superior person as the clergyman, what exception could any one take to her? And if a dignitary of Mr. Bryant's reputation had done the very thing he was contemplating for himself, had married a farmer's daughter, surely his own position was precedented, simple, and natural? Views so ludicrously unreal that they dissolved instantaneously.

When one has been startled, feeling and thought swing wildly from extreme to extreme, and Vincent's momentary satisfaction was succeeded by a sense of intolerable irritation and disgust. A shiver ran down his back, for it suddenly occurred to him

that there was a family likeness between Mrs. Bryant and his own adorable Nannie. Good heavens! it was surely impossible that the lovely girl could turn into a person like that! But Mr. Bryant was talking on; explaining away very plausibly his denial of Ann Leach when first confronted by her—'So changed from what she was that we neither of us recognised her'—'to my poor wife and myself that woman's propinquity a terrible infliction'—and so forth. Till Vincent interrupted with a sudden burst of harsh, unmirthful laughter. To think that conventional gentlemen like Mr. Bryant and himself could ever be connected with Mrs. Leach! In his own grating laugh Vincent heard the laughter of the world when he should have his peasant bride; who was like Mrs. Bryant, cousin to the Methodist ranter, and niece to Mrs. Leach! 'It will be impossible to marry Nannie!' said his depressed spirit.

Mr. Bryant, who had not the clue to Sir Vincent's amusement, stopped short in his explanations, with a shudder.

CHAPTER II

No doubt the clergyman's was the sanguine temperament, and hope sprang eternal in his breast. Sir

Vincent's laugh flattened his spirits for a few minutes; but presently he began to think it mere ill manners; for his patron shook his hand no less civilly than usual at parting, and his last words were really cordial: 'What the deuce is there in all this to drive you away from Everwell?'

Before the day was over Mr. Bryant had decided not to flee from his parish in too great a hurry, and his resolution to obtain the young baronet for a son-in-law was sprouting again green as ever. For this is how Georgina received her father's unpleasant news.

'I really do think, papa,' she said, 'you must have been out of your mind to make such a *mésalliance* as that.'

'Georgina, it is not your place to make the remark,' he replied, chafing horribly. She wept; at least Mr. Bryant thought so.

'Dearest, dearest papa! Forgive me! No, no, I should not reproach you when I know you are suffering yourself from your mistake. But I can't help feeling it most *dreadfully*. I have been used to such a very different sort of people. Papa, dear, if I have to associate with—farmers' daughters, what will Lady Katharine think? and—oh, papa—*Vincent?*' she sobbed.

'You'll have to give Vincent up, my poor child.'

'Oh, I can't—I *can't*,' mourned Georgina, in

heart-broken accents; 'I—I *love* him so!' Poor Mr. Bryant! He had not expected this.

'My child! My poor, dear child!' he exclaimed, kissing her. Then he rose and walked up and down the room in great agitation. 'Come now, Georgie, this won't do. Come now, Georgie, be brave, my dearest child, and look your fate sternly in the face. Apart from the question of your stepmother altogether, Georgie, you mustn't be hoping to marry Sir Vincent Leicester. He's a cut above you, Georgie, that's the fact of the matter, and he knows it himself well enough. He has changed his mind; and I knew all along it wouldn't do. I had no idea, Georgie, you were so hard hit; my poor child.' Then Georgina sat up with an air of desperate pride, forcing her broken heart together again that her dear father might take comfort.

'No one shall know that I suffer, papa. Of course, Vincent will see *now* that it cannot be.'

'What do you mean, Georgie, by *now?*'

'Oh, you foolish papa—haven't you seen? But no—it was always chiefly when we were alone—dear Vincent. No, he has not changed to me. And we have been so happy together these few days! Now, of course, it must all be given up.' All this was confessed with stammering modesty, and Mr. Bryant was greatly moved. He pondered.

'My child,' said the father at last, 'I will say

this much for Vincent Leicester; if he has renewed his courtship since you have met here, I do not believe he is the man to draw back now merely on account of your stepmother's connections. If his love or his honour, or, as I hope, both, prompt him to engage himself to you, Georgie, he will override objections of the nature you fear; only, my dearest child, you must not attach too much significance——'

But Georgina smiled with serene and sparkling eyes. 'His love and his honour! ah yes! dear papa, you know him too! Thank you for reminding me. I am content to trust to dear Vincent's love and honour!' and she went away smiling to herself; for verily she did believe in her lover's honour; and she had boundless confidence in her own powers of seduction.

But Mr. Bryant felt himself torn in pieces by so many conflicting emotions. He could make no stand at all against Georgina's pathos; and now poor dear Emma was pathetic too. He found his wife in tears, in her own ugly room where Georgina's improving finger had not taken the trouble to intrude. On her knee lay the thrush, which she had given to Georgina, and which the girl had already starved to death.

Mr. Bryant was fond of dumb creatures as well as of his wife, and he did feel annoyed with Georgina this time. He sat down by Emma's side and comforted her.

'Oh, Ned,' said poor Emma, 'it isn't only the bird! But whenever I think of Georgie I feel I

must cry. Why ever did you send her away when she was a little thing, and getting to love me like her mother? She'll never be my daughter now. She only laughed at my having lost Jerry's pretty loving ways. She would prevent you loving me if she could.'

'No one shall do that, Emma! But you are too hard on Georgie, my love. It is only that she is young and a little thoughtless.'

'But I'd have been so fond of her, Ned! I had all the love I was going to give my own children ready to give her. And she don't want it.'

'My poor Emma! Yes. I wish you had a dear daughter of your own,' he said, soothing her.

'Oh yes, yes, Ned! I do wish it. I love to think you wish it for me. I had a daughter once! Let me talk about her, Ned,' whispered the lonely woman, passionately, 'just for once while there is only you and me to hear. My baby that died long ago, and I wasn't able to mourn for her at the time, so the tears are here still after all these years, waiting to flow.'

'I wish she had lived, Emma. I wish you had had her with you.' And at the moment, remorse busy in his heart, he did wish it.

'Oh Ned, dearest, dearest husband! It does me good to hear you say that—to know you mean it and think it.'

Alas for Mr. Bryant! She went on. 'I am feeling it so to-day, Ned, because I have seen that dear girl of Ben's again! Oh, Ned, they were like each other! I could have fancied Mary growing up just like that. It feels almost as if she was my own sweet little Mary come to life!' Mr. Bryant started to his feet. It seemed as if cold hands had seized him and were clawing at his vitals. A perspiration of horror broke out on his brow. He was conscious of evils in swift approach.

'Good heavens, Emma!' he said, all his tenderness vanishing, 'what are you saying? You seem to forget Mary's position. And as to that Nannie—you have nothing to do with her. I tell you, she is the one member of your brother's family whom I cannot endure; whom I will not have brought into my house!' Emma was terrified.

CHAPTER III

'WHAT is the matter?' asked Lady Katharine, hearing her son laugh in a wild disconcerted sort of way, as he sat by himself in the library after the clergyman's departure. John muttered something about crackling thorns under a pot, keeping his back to her ladyship and continuing to rub the

antique bronze lamp, which swung about in the draught, and made strange shadows among the suits of armour and rusty swords and pikes. Lady Katharine was offended and went to complain to her son.

'I have some news for you, mother!' cried Vincent. 'Never mind about John. He has only been converted, and when I send Alick to the asylum I will secure a vacancy for him as well. Listen—Bryant has been here.'

'Well?' said the widow, sitting very straight in the lounging chair and not looking pleased at Vincent, who was sprawling on the sofa before her, his countenance still agitated by ungenial laughter. She agreed with Mr. Sandford; the manners of the rising generation were very bad.

'Vincent, do stop laughing,' she said, having heard Mr. Bryant's communication. 'It is not a pleasant circumstance.'

'Why not?' returned the son, with slight defiance in his tone; 'I never was so amused in my life!'

'So it appears. You don't seem to recollect—' she hesitated and changed her ending. 'I really wish, dear, you had been less hasty about the Bryants.'

'Why?' The note of defiance was becoming louder. Lady Katharine was determined to say it this time.

'I should be exceedingly sorry, Vincent, that you connected yourself with people——' Something in her son's expression checked her again.

'Now, mother, take care. I propose to judge people by what they are; not by what stupid, musty old ancestors they may have had. Ancestors! What humbug it is! Haven't we all had much the same number of ancestors? And I don't know what benefit I ever got from the bloodthirsty or dissolute or ignorant old gentlemen, who have, the greater number of them, left no better record than their names on that family tree.' The widow was shocked.

'I had no idea, Vincent, that you had such republican ideas. They are most mischievous. Your dear father always said so. You cannot mean what you say. And when you marry I do sincerely implore you to marry a lady of your own rank. I do not attach importance to money, or even to exalted position; but blood is essential—most essential.'

Vincent laughed again. He took a penknife and drove it into his finger.

'See, mother, my blood is not so very blue after all! I fancy red blood is the essential; to flow freely and make use of its opportunities, building up a man or a woman either, big and strong, and fresh coloured and good tempered. Thank you for my red blood, mother. Look at it! Isn't it a fine

colour? But, do you know, if you pricked the finger of some buxom milkmaid with never a grandfather, and let the drops mingle with mine you wouldn't know one from the other!' Lady Katharine pushed his hand away.

'Don't, Vincent. That is a disgusting way of speaking, and of lacerating yourself. But I hope, dear,' she added, tenderly, taking his hand again and staunching the wound with her handkerchief, 'if you are determined on making this marriage, that our dear Miss Bryant's family (apart from her stepmother) will prove a great deal better than we fear.'

'Georgina?' laughed Vincent, 'her blood is red enough in all conscience! How richly it mantles up in her cheek when she is pleased, or when she is put out. Such a beauty as that would want a glass case over her. Alick says all the "quality" live under glass cases and feel heaven's own breath strange and nasty. But Georgina! No, mother, it wouldn't answer. Give me the fresh breeze of the mountain side and the voice of nature. Nature has done a great deal for Georgina, but she dreads it. If the sun shines she wears a veil; even kissing she would endure in the strictest moderation. Kisses have been said to raise blisters.'

'I cannot follow you, Vincent. And I think your expressions are coarse.'

'Possibly. I tell you I have red blood in my veins. I like the sun,' cried Nannie's lover; 'I like simplicity and confidence in one's warmest and purest instincts. There are kisses I like, mother,' he said, bending over the horrified widow. 'Ye gods! for them I would barter the family tree and every blue drop in my body; the applause of men and life in drawing-rooms under glass cases from henceforth until all the seas run dry. They are the only thing worth living for! They are life itself, hope, happiness, heaven!' said Vincent, the more vehemently that his resolution had been very rudely shaken.

'I think, Vincent, you have gone out of your mind,' said Lady Katharine, coldly. But, poor boy, she pitied him heartily! What could be more unfortunate than to be deeply and irrevocably enamoured of a beautiful and an excellent and a suitable young lady, and then to discover that her stepmother was a farmer's daughter? Lady Katharine foresaw that she would have to overlook this one defect in the charming Miss Bryant. Her son's precious heart must not be broken. And Georgina was *so* nice. The widow slept badly, thinking of Fortune's unkindness.

But Vincent had slept badly for many a night. Love had kept him restless,—love for the unattainable Nannie; and then the (still vague) idea of marrying her and passing the rest of his life in a perpetually apologetic or a perpetually truculent attitude. To-

night Mr. Bryant had murdered his sleep effectually; the man's love story had vulgarised his own, and the offence was unpardonable.

Yesterday Vincent's position had been this: the game he was playing was worth its candle; once in a thousand years some lowly maiden arises as rare, as delicate, as bewitching as Nannie; and once in a thousand years a lover is found bold enough to raise her to the purple that should have been hers by birth; in warm moments he was even pleased by the singularity, the risk, the romance of the part he meant to act; always, he loved her too much to regret that he had declared his passion; and, oh heavens! had found it returned. Sweet, lovely, enchanting Nannie! she should be his; though to get her he must scandalise all his friends and infuriate all his relations; what matter when he had found an Earthly Paradise? So much for yesterday.

To-night a parson had suddenly burst into his Earthly Paradise; was noisily claiming joint ownership and vociferously pointing out that its situation was not among the lofty mountains of the ideal and the beautiful, but in the low-lying, malarious, and hateful swamps of vulgar reality. A horrid travesty of Vincent's charming drama was being played for his edification. There had been another beauty in Nannie's own family;

a beauty who had now grown stout and flurried, and confessedly 'a little underbred, you know.' And another gentleman,—in Everwell at this moment,—had married beneath him; and, oh horrors! had lived to wish he hadn't done it! Vincent's plot had lost the charm of originality.

'I will marry my little darling,' said the lover to himself, 'for I cannot live without her; and thank Heaven I have pledged myself to her. Yes, I will marry Nannie, and live on in my Earthly Paradise. Only I will not confess my marriage. What good could it possibly do to either of us?'

But there seemed no sort of finality about this resolution; and sleep was no nearer his eyelids than before. There were, however, two stable poles to his revolving emotions. One was indignation against the parson; the other a consuming desire to see dear Nannie again, though he was certainly reluctant in that matter of the formal proposal, and though he had a carking fear that after the manner of prudent young women in moral anecdotes she would at their next meeting simply give him back his ring, and refuse to have further dealings with him of any sort, thus bringing the sweet adventure to a premature conclusion. Could Nannie be so unkind? Vincent's hair stood on end at the thought; and he could not sleep for the dread of it.

But morning came at last, and with it came Alick. Vincent, glad of distraction to his despondent thoughts, surveyed the prophet's increased dignity of appearance with a certain half-approving curiosity.

'Sit down, Alick,' he said. 'These conferences are weighty affairs. The two kings at Sparta must often have needed such. What has happened at Everwell which needs my interference?' Sir Vincent spoke in the slightly amused tone which the preacher disliked.

'Did Mr. Bryant tell you, sir, as he's my uncle?' asked the inexorable Alick, without preamble.

'Yes,' drily.

'Is he the man you took him for, sir?'

'What do you mean?' stiffly.

'Is he a fit man to be over the people in the Lord?' asked the prophet, and Vincent would doubtless have laughed but for the man's majestic mien.

'I did not expect class prejudice of this sort from you, Alick.'

'You mistake me, sir. Mr. Bryant lied about it.'

'That is an improper expression for you to use.'

'Sir, you heard him yourself say he had never seen mother afore.'

'Well, he was mistaken. It is no concern of mine, and I decline to discuss it.'

'It is your concern, sir, for you have set this man over us in the Lord. He came to mother that very evening and bribed her to hold her tongue.'

Vincent rose angrily, 'I have refused to discuss this with you. If you have no business to bring me but gossip of this sort, you may go away.'

But he had had another turn against his friend Mr. Bryant; and to shake off his irritation became yet more difficult. He went to Lady Katharine for consolation.

'Tell me, mother,' he said, abruptly, as they drove an hour or two later to Tanswick, 'would you have thought very badly of Bryant if he had hushed up that information he gave us yesterday?'

'Oh,' said the widow, comfortably, 'of course when a gentleman finds his position misunderstood, his very first impulse is to explain.'

'Exactly,' muttered the son; and feared that his own position would be much misunderstood when he was secretly married to Nannie.

'Is not that precisely what our dear Mr. Bryant has done?'

'Yes, I believe so,' said Vincent, drily, and would have left the matter there; but Lady Katharine improved the occasion, little thinking of the second meaning all her words bore for her son.

'I can imagine no greater calamity in a family than a man's marrying beneath him.'

'It depends on the woman. Mrs. Bryant was not a good selection.'

'On the contrary, she seems an unpresuming, diffident person. Just think of the younger women of the Randle family! I have a positive dread of young women of that class. I don't wonder, dear, you are vexed about Mr. Bryant. One is afraid there must be a great coarseness in a man's nature when he can fall in love with a woman in that sort of inferior position.'

'Men do it every day.'

'I cannot believe,' said the unsuspecting lady, earnestly, 'that any young man of *principle* would yield to such ill-regulated desires for a moment. He must have been very careless—giddy, I fear—to get into an entanglement of the sort; and very weak not to have extricated himself. Don't you agree with me, Vincent?'

'No, I don't. Not if the girl in question was good and nice—as well as beautiful,' answered the son, awkwardly; afraid of betraying too much, and hating Mrs. Bryant, the caricature of Nannie, whose cause he was apparently pleading.

'My dear boy! That *is* such an uninstructed, childish view. *No* woman in a humble position, who is good and nice, unless she is positively *silly*, will form an attachment to any one out of her station, or permit on his part the smallest attention or intimacy.'

'There are exceptional cases,' urged Vincent.

Lady Katharine thought she had perhaps said too much against Georgina's father; and began now to apologise for him, and to praise, in fact to over-praise, his charming daughter. Vincent made a few sarcastic replies; then suddenly resolved to end at least this misunderstanding. 'Mother,' he said, gravely, checking the ponies and looking round so as to meet her anxious gaze, 'please remember that there never was any engagement between Georgina and me; I am sorry I ever gave you the impression that I wished to marry her.'

'Vincent!' Lady Katharine was taken completely by surprise, and so much shocked that she simply refused to accept what he was saying. Her peaceful history had centred round one solitary and perfectly satisfactory love; and so to her a wandering affection seemed symptomatic of almost depravity. It was incredible of Vincent, who was beginning to inspire her with respect. Moreover, by this time Lady Katharine was far more in love with Georgina than ever Vincent had been, and her inconsistent mind was quite equal to the task of disliking alliance with a family of such *very* queer connections, and at the same time defending her son for insisting upon the marriage. But now here was Vincent himself talking of drawing back! She had not expected it; it argued selfishness and the most

blameworthy worldliness. She could not believe it. She preferred to think he was not serious. Georgina and he had no doubt had some little misunderstanding, which could be quickly set right by a little friendly help from their elders.

There are many admirable women whose ideas are all in a fog like Lady Katharine's. Fortunately, their actions are generally directed by some clearer part of their composition. They consider themselves to have authority for their condition from at least one great moral preceptor. Does he not say, that if truths of apparently contrary character are candidly and rightly received, they will fit themselves together in the mind without any trouble? Such an accommodating mind was the charitable one of Lady Katharine Leicester.

CHAPTER IV

'For always? Oh, it seems too wonderful! You didn't think to say it to me till that night, sir, did you? Are you sure? For always?'

'Nannie, I would not deceive you for all the world. A fortnight ago it did not seem possible to me; I do not now see the way very clearly. But, Nannie, I do wish it. I love you above everything. I wish to have you for always; for my dear, dear wife.'

'Oh, I can't, I can't!' cried Nannie, her woman's instinct divining the hesitation which he was too honest to conceal from her. And she burst into tears. How could Love see her weep unmoved? He knelt, drawing her to his heart.

'Darling! dearest! tell me everything. What is the matter? Don't be afraid to tell me.'

'If I were a lady,' moaned Nannie, 'I would—oh, I would this minute. You know it! But we are too different. It frightens me. It couldn't be right. Oh, think if I made you unhappy! if we came to wish we hadn't done it!'

'Nannie! Nannie!' said Vincent, but with no arguments quite ready to expose the fallacy of her reasoning. 'What can I say, sweet Nannie, but that I love you—love you with all my heart, Nannie? And if you love me——'

Footsteps were heard approaching, and remembering the necessities of the position, Vincent was obliged, very reluctantly, to relinquish her from his embrace; they both rose, tremulous and uncertain of themselves and afraid to speak to each other till the intruder had passed. Indeed they looked guilty enough as Mrs. Bryant walked slowly by, not without a glance of inquiry and an attempted greeting, to which neither of them responded.

'Do you think, sir, I ought to tell my father?' were Nannie's first words when they were alone again.

'Tell him if you like, Nannie. Tell any one you like,' said Vincent.

'Oh no! No one unless I must. It would seem like boasting!' Then she laid her hand on her lover's arm and raised her eyes to his. 'Good-bye. You see it must be so. Shall I give you your ring?' But he kept silence, gazing at her and learning every line of the sweet face. And then he smiled, for she was very fair; and her innocent eyes were meeting his with unconcealed tenderness.

'Nannie,' said Vincent, abruptly, 'let us *wait*.' There was again a short silence.

'Wait?' she repeated, doubtfully, 'I don't see that waiting could make any difference.'

'Yes. One never knows what changes may come. Something might turn up to make our way plain; I cannot give you up altogether, sweet Nannie, when I know you love me. Nannie, I would wait a hundred years for you. Will you not wait a little while for me? Come now—' he tried to speak lightly, 'you won't rush off desperately and marry Alick?'

'Oh no!' said Nannie, flushing and offended.

'That is something. Nannie, we could have a talk out here sometimes, couldn't we? We should get to know each other and to see if we could venture our whole lives together. I should know

that you were at heart my little sweetheart all the time, and we should be happy living upon hope. Will you consent to *wait*, Nannie?'

'Would all that really be right?' said Nannie, her hand stealing into his.

'Yes, quite right!' said Vincent. 'Dearest, dearest, I love you!'

Nannie had no reservations in her mind, and her perfect confidence in him appealed to her lover strongly. There was infinite reverence in the grave kiss he pressed now upon her willing lips.

'You have my ring, Nannie? You remember what I told you it meant?' said Vincent. 'Sacred, deserved, and endless trust. You will remember that, my Nannie?'

'To be at heart your little sweetheart,' she murmured, repeating his words, and leaning her forehead against his arm with a little moan of great happiness.

'To be my wife if ever we see our way to it. Say yes, my darling,' he urged, anxious to remove ambiguity, which if not now, might in a little while startle her confiding innocence.

'If things get very different,' said Nannie; then moved by his earnestness she whispered gravely, 'Yes.'

'Thank you, my treasure—my lovely treasure!' said Vincent, his cheek flushing.

And somehow they stood a long time together there, in the dying sunlight, not saying much, but smiling at each other, and already feeling the exhilarating influence of the sparkling wine of hope.

But the question was, had they climbed over a certain stile, to a path which leads indeed along by the wayside, but through a meadow; and that a meadow easy to the feet, and called in ancient times By-path Meadow?

Mrs. Bryant, at any rate, had no doubt that they had wandered in this manner.

CHAPTER V

NANNIE, left alone, was sighing distractedly at having had to part from her dear lover, when she felt a hand laid on her shoulder, and she started to her feet, to find her aunt by her side. The girl drew away coldly from the proffered embrace, for her interest in the affectionate woman had by no means been stirred yet. Mrs. Bryant addressed her pleadingly.

'You'd rather I didn't tell your father or Patty what I saw, dear, wouldn't you? You know, my dear,' urged Emma, having gained no response, 'I saw Sir Vincent Leicester talking to you.'

'Well,' burst forth Nannie at last, 'we weren't

doing anything we oughtn't. You may tell father if you wish. But if you talk to him in that sort of way you'll get me into trouble. Father is very—I mean he wouldn't hearken to what I had to say, like he would to Patty or Caroline.'

'Will you let *me* talk to you a bit, as if I was your own mother, Nannie, instead of your aunt?'

'If you wish,' said Nannie, coldly. Mrs. Bryant took her hand.

'My dear, I want to tell you we know Sir Vincent very well indeed, because we believe he is going to marry Georgina, Mr. Bryant's beautiful daughter.' Nannie snatched her hand angrily away.

'You are making a mistake, aunt. I happen to know Sir Vincent is not promised to any one!' she said, impetuously.

'My dear, my dear! Was Sir Vincent talking that way to you? Was he saying you were a pretty girl and he loved you?' Nannie's heart thumped and her colour came and went; the mildest woman will resist when there is an attempt to rob her of her lover.

'Aunt, there is only one person I thought I ought to tell, unless father. I thought maybe I ought to tell Alick, who has a sort of right, and who is better to me than all my own brothers and sisters. I don't see no reason at all why I should tell *you*.'

'My love, don't go away. Perhaps it will help you, Nannie, if I tell you something about—— only you must never speak of it to any one. Will you promise me that? I've had a deal of trouble, Nannie,' she went on, 'though you see me now with such a good husband and in such a nice home. One may be very sad at heart though one is rich and comfortable. I want to tell you a sad story, dear, because it may be a warning to you against gentlemen and their fine promises.' Poor Emma could not help beating about the bush nervously.

'I am sorry if you aren't happy with Mr. Bryant,' said Nannie, trying to get away.

'Oh, my dear child, that is not what I mean. Mr. Bryant isn't a gentleman! And you mustn't fancy the story has to do with me,' said Emma, fussily; 'it was about just a great friend of mine!'

'Isn't Mr. Bryant a gentleman?' exclaimed Nannie, thinking that gentlefolks and common people seemed much more mixed up than she had supposed.

'Oh, it has nothing at all to do with Mr. Bryant, Nannie! You must on no account speak of it to him. My dear, you know about the little girl that was nursed with you, and was to have been your sister like, if she hadn't died? Haven't they never told you of her?' cried Mrs. Bryant, 'and she like your own twin sister? They

must have talked to you of her. They can't have let her be quite forgotten and she so innocent!'

'Mary Smith, wasn't it?' said Nannie, not at all interested.

'The story was never to be told, Nannie,' said Mrs. Bryant, sinking her voice. 'Oh, I was so fond of that child! She was to have been called Lilian or Violet, but your mother said plain Mary was best, and I got fond of the name afterwards as it was hers.'

'Why was the baby not to be spoken of, aunt?'

'Because—— I thought you'd have guessed, my dear. The poor mother had no real husband, Nannie.'

'Oh, I see.' Nannie understood now; not that Mrs. Bryant was telling her own history; that did not occur to her: the clergyman's wife was quite too prosperous; but she was indignant at the implied warning to herself. 'I can't understand your dreaming there is anything like that,' she cried, angrily; 'I should despise myself. He would despise me. I should just think he would indeed! He would think me a bad girl even to *imagine* such a thing!' and Nannie's lip trembled and her blue eyes flashed.

'Oh, my dear child, you don't know how easy

it is to a poor girl if she loves her sweetheart. I have seen so many nice girls go wrong, Nannie, and so easily. They get to think it almost the right thing to do. My dear, my dear, you must give it all up before you come to caring for him like that, for if you once got really to love him, Nannie, a young gentleman like Sir Vincent Leicester would twist you round his little finger.' Nannie rose very angry.

'You must be a very wicked woman yourself, aunt, to think such things of me. I know right from wrong and I can take care of myself, thank you. And I won't hear any more of that bad Mrs. Smith, and have wicked thoughts put into my head, and poison into what is the best thing I have ever had in my whole life!'

'My dear!' cried Mrs. Bryant, taking the girl's hand again and holding it tight in her tremulous grasp, 'I never said you had wicked thoughts. No more hadn't Mary's mother. She was not led astray in the way you think. It hurts me to have you call her a wicked woman, Nannie. She was just innocent and young like you.' Nannie was touched.

'Aunt Emma, I see you mean to be kind, but you are quite mistaking me, and you are mistaking *him*. He would *never* ask that. He wanted me to marry him. And I said, No. I felt I ought to

say, No. But he knows I love him, and I shall never, never, never love any one else. There! You know all now.'

'Nannie, I must tell you more about that woman, though it hurts me to speak of the wickedness of any one I loved so much. She thought like you, dear, that a talk of marrying made it all right. She believed all he said, and she thought he was noble because he was ready to marry a poor girl, and he a gentleman with grand relations and money, and the pleasant way of speaking that gentlemen have, as you know, my dear. And it was kept a secret and no one knew. It all seemed to come about natural-like, and he said it was only for a time. And he got her away from her home and met her in a place far away, and they were married as she thought, like every one else; only no one knew. And that poor girl was as happy as the Queen for a while, Nannie——' her voice failed her.

'Please, aunt, forgive me for saying she was a bad woman,' said Nannie, impulsively, kneeling down to comfort poor Mrs. Bryant. 'I didn't know you cared for her so, and I didn't understand she was married to him. Why didn't you say that first?'

'Thank you, my love. You think it makes such a difference, Nannie? But the marrying didn't

make it right for that woman, Nannie. My dear, he had told her lies. Gentlemen do that to poor girls. Oh, my dear child, take warning and don't be believing what that young man says! That poor girl loved Frederick, Nannie, and thought she knew all about him, and that he was true. But in a very little while he got tired of her, and she saw him seldomer and seldomer. And then she found he was making love to another—oh, it was such a bitter time, Nannie! And at last he went away—in a ship—leaving her for ever, as it turned out (and as I believe he had meant); for there was a wreck, and he was drowned. And then, Nannie, she found it all out,—that she had been simple and trusting, and deceived. And she never knew so much as his real name—never. And the man who had married them wasn't a clergyman at all. And there had been no real ceremony, nor writing names in registers, nor anything like it should be. And she was no more his wife than you are, Nannie. And her dear baby had no father; and people thought it a disgrace.' And the unhappy woman buried her face in her hands and wept.

The girl had sunk back on her heels before Mrs. Bryant and was watching her with wondering, compassionate eyes. 'Poor thing!' said Nannie, gently; 'how she must have suffered. Oh, how wrong of me to speak as I did of her!'

'Thank you, my dear—my dear,' sobbed Mrs. Bryant; and there was a long pause. 'Nannie, my love,' said the poor thing after a while, drawing into her arms the fair girl who seemed dear almost as Mary Smith herself, 'you'll not tell Mr. Bryant nor any one I told you of this. Hardly any one ever knew it, and they made me promise never to tell. But you'll take warning, dear, and give up that bad young man and never trust him again.' Nannie sprang to her feet and with her fingers felt the ring he had given her hidden away from sight. Was her faith in him to be tried thus soon?

'No, aunt,' said Nannie, clasping her hands and with her eyes fixed on the heavens, her sweet lips smiling. 'I shall always love him. He is not like that wicked man. I love him, and I honour him, and I trust him. I know he is true, and I will always be true to him.'

CHAPTER VI

NANNIE had intended to tell Alick about Sir Vincent; she had thought also of telling her father or Patty. But that talk with her aunt changed her resolve. It opened her eyes to see in what

light her love story would be regarded; and believing as she did that no light could be more false, it seemed wrong to expose its innocence to it. After all there was next to nothing to tell. What could it matter to any one that she had chosen to love a bright particular star? And would she not be profoundly disloyal to make his proposals public when she was not able to accept them, and they seemed so easily misunderstood? Not able to accept them? Nannie began to waver. It was horrible to her that doubts of his good faith had been suggested. She wanted to do something at once to show her entire faith in him. Oh, what would he think of her—would he ever forgive her—if he fancied her hesitation arose from any doubt of his truth?

'What was Aunt Emma talking to you about, Nan?' Patty asked that evening, as the sisters sat busy at their needlework; 'she seems to me a silly sort of woman. I can't see what she wants to go crying and slobbering over you for.'

'I don't care to tell you,' said Nannie, with her little defiant air.

'I've a notion, girls,' said Patty after a pause, 'that Aunt Emma's a queer one. I've been adding two and two together for years, and that's how the sum comes out.'

'I don't believe it!' cried Nannie; 'you are

always fancying things against folk, Patty, and adding twos and twos together, as never were meant to be added. Even if things look strange against people,' she cried, remembering her sister's warnings about Sir Vincent and her own denials, which were an impediment now in the way of the free confession, which had perhaps been her wisdom, 'you shouldn't always think they must be wicked. I hate that way. I am sure everybody in the world is a great deal better than they seem! You make me frightened ever to tell you anything of anybody, for you are sure to find evil in it. How unhappy you must be!'

'Nannie, you make my head ache with your vulgar noise,' said the languid Caroline. Patty changed the subject. 'Child,' said she, composedly, 'father has been talking of Alick again, and wanting to settle your wedding-day;' and she smiled pleasantly, holding up the linen she was hemming; 'you'll do with a few of these tablecloths, I fancy; won't you?' The girl pushed back her chair angrily with the words on her tongue—

'I am not going to marry Alick nor no one;' but Caroline got the start of her, and took the wind out of her sails.

'I don't see why Nannie should be married first,' she grumbled; 'when I had an offer at seventeen I said I'd wait a bit. *I* wasn't so pleased at the

idea of a man fiddling with me. And *he* wasn't deformed like Alick. You have a bad taste, Nannie.'

Alas! how unfortunate is the way we all go about, unintentionally taking the wind out of each other's sails! Nannie's words were not uttered, for it infuriated her to hear Alick spoken of so.

'He's the best man in Everwell,' she cried, 'and no one that he wanted to marry would think twice if he was deformed or not!' So she kept her secret; and people continued to fancy her betrothed to her cousin, Alick Randle the prophet.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Bryant, had she been a wise woman, would probably have confided Nannie's romance at once to some responsible person. But she was afraid to inform her husband, and her brother being on some points righteous over-much, she was afraid to tell him. Patty and Caroline were only girls themselves, and Mrs. Bryant was a little afraid of them too. Yet the dear child must not be left to take care of herself. 'She is not to be trusted; no woman is!' sighed Emma, and thought it very hard that poor women should be blamed for what was only natural to them.

Vincent was at the vicarage next day and horrified the poor lady. She had seen him yesterday standing in the evening sunlight, his eyes bent on the beauty of the village girl, whose heart he was

stealing with unmeant vows. Yet here he was flirting with Georgina; for Emma did not understand his air of cousinly intimacy, and she could not imagine Georgie's license of manner exhibited to any one but an accepted lover. Oh, he must be a dreadful young man—deceiving Georgina even as he was deceiving poor, helpless, little Nannie! Mrs. Bryant thought with alarm that she would not be doing her duty to her stepchild if she did not put her on her guard. Even to save Nannie, it would not be right to let Georgina be trapped into a loveless marriage with an unprincipled man. She resolved to expostulate even with Sir Vincent himself, whom personally she did not dislike so much as her opinion of him seemed to justify. But day after day passed and the timid woman did nothing, though her cowardly inaction made her miserable. She felt ill with distress and anxiety; and Georgina perceived that she grew uglier and stupider daily.

Now the clergyman's spirits had by this time greatly revived; for he thought the Leicesters had behaved to him most handsomely under his unpleasant circumstances. He was quite resolved not to bustle away from his cure. For there was no doubt he had made an excellent impression in the diocese. He had been to X—— and had dined with the Bishop. He had preached in Uggle Grinby, and invitations were beginning to pour in. The

reputation which had preceded him in his journey north had expanded in the bracing air of the new county. It was said that Everwell was a dull parish for such an important man, and that he had come thither only temporarily, for rest and health, and because of his connection with the Leicesters. Mr. Bryant realised that if he kept quiet he need not leave his vicarage till he was appointed to a better one. Meanwhile his wife fell into the background, and Georgina and he went about together.

Georgina went to a ball at the Sandfords, and Mr. Bryant appeared for a short time just to fetch her away. He found his daughter the belle of the evening, with a circle of the best young men round her. Vincent was not present, and Lord George Frere was making the most of his opportunity. Nay, Georgina was already patronised by the Duchess. For the young lady was superbly handsome, agreeable, and of excellent manners, and going, it was said, to become Lady Leicester; so her Grace thought it well to begin by civility. The Leicesters were the oldest family in the north, and Sir Vincent was Lord Henslow's grandson. Georgina was clearly a person to be cultivated. Who was she? Mr. Bryant's daughter. Who was Mr. Bryant? A very rising and distinguished ecclesiastic; supposed to belong to the Norfolk Bryants, and safe, people said, for a deanery. But had Georgina

acquired her bearing in a country parsonage? Oh dear no! she had been brought up by her aunt, Lady Cookham. The new Lady Cookham? Oh, then she was all right. And she was really engaged to Sir Vincent Leicester? Oh yes—engaged for some time; but the marriage had been postponed on account of his mourning. At least that was the report, and Miss Bryant had never denied it. The clergyman was not an hour at the ball, but this gossip reached his ears; and he saw the Duchess speak to Georgina. No, he would not leave Everwell yet.

But it was on the day after the ball that Mrs. Bryant, thinking the girl in her fatigue gentler than usual, took upon herself to warn Georgina. The reader perceives that the occasion was in no wise opportune.

'Georgie,' she began, with the diminutive always irritating to the beauty from her stepmother's lips, 'Georgie, dear, you would never think of caring for a man who wasn't good, would you?' They had a preliminary skirmish about the expression 'care for'; which Mrs. Bryant altered to 'marry,' and the girl then asked with an air of offence whether the allusion was to Sir Vincent; and declared it never her habit either to refuse or to accept a man before he proposed, so that Mrs. Bryant's conclusions were proved premature and

immodest. Warning Georgina was not easy; still with desperate courage Emma persevered. 'My dear, I'm very much afraid that young man hasn't a clean heart to offer you.' Georgina yawned and said—

'Like the rest of them, he regards marriage as whitewash.'

'Georgie, dear,' urged Mrs. Bryant, 'I happen to know he's carrying on at this very time with another girl; a poor girl; one you never heard of,' said Mrs. Bryant, fussily, anxious to prevent any suspicion from lighting on Nannie. Georgina rose in high dudgeon. She was half a head taller than Mrs. Bryant, and looked to the poor woman commanding enough for a goddess.

'Well, you *are* a vulgar person!' she said. 'The idea of prying into Sir Vincent's private affairs in this manner and reporting them to me! I never was so disgusted in my life. I am not a child. I know what men are well enough; and I know what you don't seem to know, Mrs. Bryant, which are proper subjects for conversation and which are not.'

Of course poor Emma apologised and retired in tears. Her life was one long failure, and she had failed again.

Georgina, however, took the hint about the recusant lover. It had not seriously occurred to her that his coldness was caused by a rival. Who

was there at Everwell who could possibly be a rival to her? Gerty Sandford? or the hunting young lady from Faverton who had been at the Heights on a visit?

'It is just that creature with the red hair!' said Georgina now; for her vision was keen, and she had never forgotten a look of interest which had kindled in Vincent's eyes when on the very day of her own arrival, Nannie had come into his field of vision. She resolved to find out about it.

CHAPTER VII

Mrs. Bryant, having failed with Georgina and done nothing with Sir Vincent, turned to Alick as a last resource. Nannie had said he was to know the whole thing, so there could be no harm in talking it over with him; and Mrs. Bryant looked upon Alick as the desirable suitor for her niece, just as every one had looked upon Ned Bryant as the desirable suitor for herself in her younger days. As she walked slowly under the August sun to Alick's workshop she considered how much better it would have been if she had taken good advice and married Ned when she had been seventeen. He would not then have had that first disagreeable

wife of obscure history and high lineage; he might not have become such a fine gentleman himself; and she would not have had her own past to look back upon. Georgina would have been her own daughter, rather dowdy; and a younger daughter Emma imagined also as born to herself and her husband, whose name was Mary, and who would now be seventeen, with the face and form of Nannie Randle. Silly fancies of course; but illusion was ever a source of enjoyment to this poor silly Emma, now middle-aged and uninteresting. She found her nephew alone, poring over his Bible, with a plate of cold and neglected vegetable food by his side,—a thing called mush, and made, I strongly suspect, of canary seed. Alick was going to preach immediately after the dinner hour; under which circumstances, especially as mush is not very seductive, he was apt to forget to feed himself.

Mrs. Bryant, who had small acquaintance with her nephew, did not find it easy to open her business, and Alick did not help her to it. He wanted to study his preachment and the woman bored him. He didn't want to talk of Nannie. The question of how he was to gain the girl had become a religious one with Alick; but God's leading in the matter was not to be learnt from the wife of the man who had brought the accursed thing to Everwell. At last, however, Mrs. Bryant said—

'You are very fond of her, aren't you, Alick? You would be patient if you thought she was a little vain and had had ideas put into her head by a wicked person? I don't mean any harm of her, dear child——'

'Who is the wicked person?' interrupted Alick, with abrupt interest. Mrs. Bryant was startled, and said she had thought he already knew.

'You mustn't think harm of *her*, Alick,' pleaded Emma, earnestly; 'she's just as innocent as possible, and indeed has acted just as is right. He has asked her to marry him and she has said No, like the good girl she is, and if there is an end of it, there is no harm done to any one.'

Alick had risen abruptly and turned his back on Mrs. Bryant, so that she did not see the passion that suddenly darkened and distorted his features. She continued in her pleading, tremulous tones: 'I have told you, Alick, because I know you are the one to save her. If something isn't done he may talk her over, for I found them together one evening in the glen, and it wasn't the first time I'm afraid, and it mayn't be the last, and I am so afraid he may beguile her with promises and steal her from *you*.'

Alick had guessed instantaneously who was the 'he' of Mrs. Bryant's confused utterances. He

began to reply, slowly at first in a choked voice, but quickly *crescendo* and *accelerando :*

'Then I'll speak to Nannie about it at once. And I'll speak to *him ;* and if my girl is being deceived by *lying words and led to destruction by the tempting of any man,* IF HE IS THE KING HIMSELF, I'LL STICK MY KNIFE IN HIM AND BE D——D FOR IT.'

And Alick turned round, suddenly facing Mrs. Bryant, who was scared by the fury she had roused ; but where she stood in the sunny window, he saw a great darkness with lightning streaks flashing over it ; and in the middle of it, clear enough, Sir Vincent Leicester himself with the air of half-amused disdain, which he had worn long ago in the dreams of Alick's feverish night. Alick snatched the knife from his plate and sprang forward upon the traitor. 'Fiend ! I will send you to your place in hell !' he shouted. Mrs. Bryant screamed.

But Alick had terrified himself quite as much as he had terrified her. The vision dissolved at once, and before he had reached his foe he saw the mere cowering woman, and dropped the knife at her feet. He had a moment of utter bewilderment, in which he had no idea of what he was doing, or where he was. Then his full consciousness returned ; he remembered every word she had said, and he knew that rage had overwhelmed his reason. 'Go away, woman,' said Alick, in a low

voice of shuddering horror; 'you are a fiend. You tempt me.'

Poor Mrs. Bryant fled.

The people assembled in the schoolhouse, which Alick used regularly now; but they had to wait for their sermon. When the preacher came he was pale and battle-stained, for a terrible anguish had he endured in the silence and the solitude after the woman had left him. He understood quite well what had happened to him in that short moment of blind and reasonless fury! He had read his Bible; he took every word of it literally; and so he knew that for a short time,—thank God, only for one short moment,—he had been *possessed by a devil.*

'Lord, Lord, save me!' cried Alick, spreading his arms to the heavens and speaking aloud with white face, seamed and twitching, 'take full possession. Never again let the enemy obtain an entrance. Thou canst command the devils and they obey Thee. Cast it out. Leave me not swept and garnished. Come in and take everlasting possession Thyself!'

Long the unhappy prophet prayed and wept, harassed by repentance and dread anxiety for his soul's welfare. And he took his Bible and pored over the gentle Gospel words which seemed meant for such storm-tossed hearts as his. Patience and long-

suffering, forbearance and mercy; charity, which hopeth all things, endureth all things, believeth all things,—these he perceived were the tender graces enjoined upon him; and for reward, All things working together for his good; and the promise, Thou shalt ask what thou wilt, and it shall be done! Ah! for grace and strength to obey! Was it not once more a test proposed by Heaven of his obedience and his faith? His prayers would all be answered, his conflicts would all be won, if—*if* he could keep under and bring into subjection these passions from the Evil One; anger, jealousy, malice, and all unkindness—ay, even against the man who had deceived him; against the man who was, after all, trying to steal from him his bride. Alick rose from his knees, strong, he hoped, in the strength of his Lord. He would walk humbly and delicately; he would pray and fast the more. And so he trusted to win the peace of his soul, and—strange mixture of the spiritual and the natural!—win too the heart of the woman he loved.

So Alick, spiritually restored though still agitated, preached his sermon; and then he visited the sick, and pleaded with this one, reprimanded that, helped and consoled a third, with more heavenly glamour, with more zeal, and with more consequent good results, than had Mr. Bryant himself.

For the clergyman also was going about the

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parish, and I should not be justified in saying that his methods were faulty or his desire to do good weak or insincere. But the devil is clever, and aims his temptations only at our vulnerable points. He sows our tares in kindly ground, while he lets our wheat flourish as long as it may. Mr. Bryant was a good clergyman enough, but a demon had taken possession of him also, and his prayers for deliverance were less heartfelt than Alick's. The people perhaps felt the difference, and for one convert of Mr. Bryant's, Alick could show ten.

Mr. Bryant began it so gradually that it had become a habit before he knew of its existence,—he let it appear that to *his* agency was due the change for the better at Everwell. He gained the reputation of a saint. It is hard to say how he could have avoided the false character, but at any rate he did not try. Mr. Stokes of Appleside-le-Hole wrote with the deepest veneration asking him to undertake the Mission he wished to hold in his parish in September. Mr. Bryant agreed. Another parson (who had a very noble parishioner already acquainted with Georgina) proposed a Retreat for clerical brethren, when for a fortnight the assembled vicars and curates would observe monastic vows and spend their time in religious exercises. The Duke was understood to favour the proposal, and had offered the clergy the run of his park. Would Mr.

Bryant attend, do some of the preaching, give hints as to his valuable parish method? etc. Yes, Mr. Bryant would attend; temporary retirement from worldly cares would please him; also a chance of advertisement. It was years since Mr. Bryant had dreamed of promotion. All of a sudden lawn sleeves loomed before him as eventual possibilities. Why not? Was he not a man of influence, a scholar? At the Retreat he resolved to pose as a theologian. And if his daughter, who already knew half the peerage, were Lady Leicester—— All at once he remembered his wife—Emma—the farmer's daughter, who had lost her looks and never attained to style. No, she could never make a bishopess. A quiet lot was appointed for him. He must submit holily. And Georgina should represent the cleverness, the success, the gentility of the family.

CHAPTER IX

Meanwhile my poor Emma spent the day with nerves entirely upset by the Everwell prophet. Her flight had been arrested by Alick's mother, who brought her into the parlour and tried to learn what had happened. 'Ann,' said Mrs. Bryant, trembling from head to foot, 'I shall be afraid to sleep in my

bed while there's a man in the place who can look like that!'

Mrs. Leach was never at a loss; she threw her apron over her head, rocked herself backwards and forwards, and asked Emma if she said a thanksgiving every night and morning for having no children.

'No, indeed I don't,' said Emma.

'You would then,' sobbed Mrs. Leach, 'if you had a boy with a head like that.'

Emma, who had never been unfriendly with Ann, felt a great longing for a talk with some one who had known her as a girl. She said she had understood every one thought so highly of Alick.

'That's one of the symptoms,' replied Mrs. Leach. 'I have a beautiful head; but I never could make no one obey mey; never. While if Alick lifts his little finger—! Cause why? They are afraid of his head breaking out, I do believe. I've been into next week many a time when he's wanted something I couldn't afford to give him; like to-day. And he breaks out at you, does he? Dear, dear, it's shocking! And all about two and sixpence for his missionary box. All the wants of my blessed boy's head are religiousable and holy ones.'

Emma was relieved to hear half a crown was the source of his agitation, and gave it at once. 'You was always the kindest creature, Emma. Yes, I'll take it, because you are one of the family. It stands

to reason I don't go talking of his head to strangers; there's a many don't know he ever had one. It's an expense, it is. This week now, there he's been preaching and preaching, and I don't say hey ain't the sweetest, convinciblest preacher ever come to Everwell. But it ain't *paying*. Maybe, Emma, you'd settle a doctor's bill for me now and again? but la! I'd as soon you didn't mention it to Mr. Bryant. "Jim," says I to the husband I had then, "I ain't one to talk my affairs on the housetop, and I don't want my poor boy's poor head flying all round the place."—"Ann," says Jim, "you are the prudentest, truthfullest woman." So we kep it secret, and Alick along of his head has done a power of good in Everwell. It's like Gospel times come again. But I wouldn't have you not to tell Mr. Bryant, for he might stop the preachings, which would be a pity for Everwell; and he might want to shut my blessed boy's head up and cause the death of his mother. Men ain't like women, Emma; they don't think of what they are doing when they take a child from a mother. You had experience of that along of Mr. Bryant, hadn't you?' Emma was naturally affected by this allusion. 'Poor dear, poor dear,' said Ann Leach, 'you are the feelingest creature! Jim always said so. My first Jim that was. You never knew Jim Leach. He was a very fine husband; but not of the good family your

brother was, Emma. Now Alick, your brother's son, is a deal what you might call more *delicate* looking than Sally there. Alick and Nannie don't look so ill-bred a couple I'm thinking. He don't match her so badly as if he had been Jim Leach's offspring.'

'Oh, what a lovely girl she is!' exclaimed Mrs. Bryant, impetuously. For the first time she had an opportunity of praising Nannie.

Ann nodded her head emphatically. 'She favours you, my dear,' she said.

'I don't know what it is takes me so with that girl!' cried Emma.

'You have a mother's heart, Emma, like mine,' replied Mrs. Leach, who delighted in wandering round her secret.

'Oh, Ann, what wouldn't I give for a sweet girl of my own like that! If you have a mother's heart you will understand what I feel.'

'I do, my dear. Both my Jims said I was a feeling woman. It's a pleasure to me to comfort any one. Let me comfort you, my poor dear sister-in-law.'

'Doesn't it seem hard, Ann, that my child was the one to die when I loved her so? and they don't seem so very fond of that Nannie. Mr. Bryant was going to let me have Mary at home with me. He was very kind about it once he saw how I felt.

And she died. Ann, you were with my baby when she died and I have never seen you since. Will you tell me about it now?'

The reader, by this time acquainted with Ann Leach, who loved mystery and delighted in scenes, can easily supply the details of the conversation.

'I'm a poor silly woman, Ann,' had sighed Mrs. Bryant, 'but I think I'll go mad sometimes looking at Nannie and fancying I see a look on her that it is impossible could be really on Sarah's child, Ann.'

'I could tell you a many ideas I have, Emma, about those children, if I wasn't afraid of Mr. Bryant, and of Ben who was always uncommon violent like a bull.'

'Yes—yes—tell me, Ann!'

'I've thought a deal to myself sitting over the fire,' said Mrs. Leach, mysteriously; and then she drew very close to her sister-in-law, and whispered.

'Ann!' exclaimed Mrs. Bryant. She started from her chair and flung herself into Mrs. Leach's arms and wept upon her ample bosom. Ann herself was moved to tears, and she dried her own and Emma's eyes alternately with a capacious red pocket-handkerchief.

'La, Emma, you are the feelingest creature. And if it wasn't for Dr. Verrill's shock mixture, which I have by me, and which we can pour down each other's spines, we'd both be in hysterics, and

objects of suspicion to Mr. Bryant and to Ben Randle, who is more like a bull than a brother-in-law. It's my belief, as I have told you, my dear, and believe me, or believe me not, I've thought of it hundreds and hundreds and dozens of times.'

CHAPTER X

'DEAR Edward, I have something so important to tell you.'

Mrs. Bryant had come in late for luncheon, and was in consequence much scolded by her hungry stepdaughter.

'Now, Georgie, be quiet,' said the clergyman, pinching her ear. Mr. Bryant put his arm through his wife's and led her into the dining-room. She looked so flushed and bright that she reminded him of the Emma of his youth; and his affectionate manner added to the illusive joy which was making her heart to dance.

'Dear Ned!' she was saying to herself, 'no, I am not afraid to ask him to manage it for me somehow! He has always been as sorry as I am that I did not have her long ago.'

But it was not till evening that she got an opportunity for the keenly desired private talk.

Mr. Bryant was kindly enough, but by this time he was tired and fussed by his day's work, and Emma found herself trembling after all. She told that she had been to see Ann. Mr. Bryant asked if the change in the woman was not lamentable; and Emma could only stammer that she had always been fond of poor Ann. Mr. Bryant thought it best to pass over in silence this glaring instance of bad taste.

'Well,' he said presently, 'what did you talk about? Her son?'

'A little. Oh, Edward,' she cried, with horrified recollection, 'I am quite certain that young man is mad!' Mr. Bryant laughed.

'Oh, he's right enough. Was that your wonderful news, Emma?'

'No, Ned, we talked of—Nannie.'

'You are infatuated about Nannie. The Greeks, Emma, considered Infatuation the first of woes.'

'Ned, I don't know how to tell you what Ann said to me about Nannie.'

'What?' quickly and suspiciously. Mrs. Bryant joined her trembling hands round his arm. All the nice speeches she had prepared fled from her memory.

'Oh, Edward, she is my child—my very own!' cried Mrs. Bryant. He flung her from him, shuddering.

'D—n that woman!' he muttered. It was all over with him now. Emma would never forgive him, and he would be revealed to the world as a cheat and a liar.

And Emma waited with her hands clasped and a happy smile on her worn face. Dear Edward's silence seemed to her of happy omen. Of course he would have a moment's reluctance before he could say the words she longed to hear. There were inconveniences connected with the darling child, which had always appeared tiresomely distinct to him. And most unfortunately, Edward had not taken a fancy to Nannie. But in a minute or two all would be right. She knew her affectionate, duty-loving, self-denying husband.

'My dearest Emma, you distress me by your credulity, and I must say by the inattention you pay to my wishes. Did I not tell you I would not have that unhappy child mentioned to any one? And of all people Ann Randle is the most dangerous.'

'Oh, Ned, I cannot help it now. Nannie is my own child! I can't take no notice of her. Oh, just think for a moment how happy it makes me! Ann told me.'

'What did she tell you? It is the greatest nonsense I ever heard. You would not believe anything on that drunken woman's authority?'

'It was all quite sensible what she said, and

exactly what might have happened with two children just the same age. And I go by a deal more than just Ann's word. My heart has been drawn to Nannie from the first moment I saw her——'

'Fiddlestrings, Emma.'

'And she is like—so like——'

'She has a likeness to you, her aunt. She is a vast deal more like Sarah, her mother.'

'Oh, Edward! How can you say such a thing? There is not one shadow of likeness!'

Mr. Bryant saw he had gone too far and was silent.

'She is like,' said Emma, with the sublime courage of maternity, 'she is like her father.' Mr. Bryant started to his feet, white with rage.

'How dare you mention that d—d scoundrel to me?' he said.

Mrs. Bryant collapsed. There was a long silence. The clergyman again wrestled with himself to recover his self-possession. Emma hoped she had impressed him, but she began dimly to recognise that her husband's dislike to the child was not easy to overcome. She began to get ready a quiet and convincing speech, something on this pattern—

'Dearest Edward, at first you did not understand how I loved my poor child. But when she became ill and died as we thought, then you realised how dear she was, and how wrong we had been to desert

her for our own convenience. And I felt our having no children of our own was a judgment. And you told me then, and over and again, dearest Ned, and I know you meant it, dear husband, that if she had only lived, I should have had her at home with me to bring up myself. You said so only a day or two ago. And now, Edward, here she is, and we can repair our fault, and God has brought her to us, and He will be displeased if we refuse to do our duty, and will bring some other awful judgment upon us.' All this had Mrs. Bryant prepared.

'What did that fool of a woman say, Emma?' asked Mr. Bryant, and the abruptness of the question scattered her thoughts again. 'Had she anything to go upon? any proofs to offer? Now, Emma, answer me,' as she stammered forth some futility, 'what did that woman Ann say had occurred?'

She said Sarah put it into her head first. She said when they were both quite little, only a few weeks old, they were as like as twins, and Sarah said she never would be certain they hadn't been mixed. Oh, Ned, it is a thing often happens in books! Indeed it is quite likely. Sarah and Ann used to talk about it. I think it was queer of Sarah. She can't have cared much for her child to be content with a doubt. But she went on suspecting, and Ann suspected. But when Sarah died, Ann thought it was useless to say anything.

She thought no one cared. Oh, Ned, it was because I never saw Ann in those days! And she watched Nannie grow up, and got quite certain, and never said anything till she saw to-day how I cared; and then she told me.'

'Is that all she said?'

'Yes, Edward, I think so; except about her feelings and——'

'Now listen, Emma,' said Mr. Bryant, glad for once to be able to state a positive fact; 'it is a tissue of lies; an invention, trumped up by a designing woman to work on your emotions and get something out of you.' And he argued the matter neither unkindly nor unreasonably. Sarah had been a sensible woman; the confusing of two infants was an incident not to be found outside the *Family Herald* novels. Ann herself should be fetched and made to confess the thing a fabrication from beginning to end. But Mr. Bryant might as well have talked to a wall. Argument was powerless against a woman like Emma.

She wept and said: 'Edward, it won't make no difference to me, even if Sarah nor no one thought it. *I* know it is true. The likeness is there and you can't account for it. And I have that within me which tells me Nannie is my own child. I don't care what any one says.' Mr. Bryant kept his patience.

'My poor dear Emma!' he said, caressingly.

'Oh, Edward,' she cried, 'you won't come between my child and me! Ned, you don't know the dreadful wicked woman I felt when I thought she had died because I had deserted her. I had cared more for being comfortable and well thought of, and having a home, than for my own child; and God was angry. I know He was. He gave me a sad heart, and He never let me have the love of no other young girl since, such as Georgie.'

He tried another tack. 'But, my love, what is it you wish to do?'

'A mother's part to my child. Even if no one but you knows she is mine.' Fortunately the project was vague.

'My dear Emma, you cannot rob Ben of his daughter on such a cock-and-bull story as this. He would not admit it for a moment. No, Emma, the thing is so plainly an imposition,—and a clumsy one,—that I forbid you to take any action in consequence. I should be false to my duty if I allowed you to destroy your reputation and your happiness on account of a designing woman's falsehood, and a hysterical infatuation. Besides, do you wish to harm the child herself? A pretty kindness it would be to her, I must say, to take her from her honourable home and throw scorn upon her parentage! You wouldn't get much gratitude from her. It would be a positively wicked action so long as there

was one doubt of the facts; and instead of having only one doubt, you have not a single certainty.' He enlarged upon this theme. 'Why, Emma, you haven't convinced *me*, your nearest and dearest! How could you expect to convince Ben or the poor child herself? My love, you would make her detest you. For her sake, if for none other, you must keep this fancy, or whatever you choose to call it, to yourself. Above all, don't say a word to Ben. He seems a little irritated with the girl. I tell you, she is a naughty little thing. If you were to put such an idea into his head, though his reason would not admit it for a moment, it might give him a prejudice against the poor girl, which would cause great unhappiness to her. Surely, Emma, you have the self-command, for the sake of her comfort and the happiness of many others whom you love, to bear your burden, and leave her in the undisputed enjoyment of her singularly happy and respectable home?' Mrs. Bryant wept. 'You will promise me, Emma? My love, I insist.'

She made one supreme effort more. 'Oh, Ned! But if it was proved, as I am sure it can be—*then* you would see her right place would be with her mother.'

'No, my dear. It grieves me to disappoint you; but I must be plain. It would be impossible.' She started to her feet.

'Edward! you have said—so often—if she had lived——'

'Hush, Emma. My dearest, very probably knowing the contingency was impossible, I may, out of my affection for you, have said rather more than I meant. But I never contemplated having allowed you to acknowledge Mary Smith as your daughter. I should be a fool to dream of such a thing now.'

'Ned, if she were called our niece——' It was unbearable. His patience failed.

'I won't have her in the house, I tell you! I won't have anything to say to her. Are you mad? I have Georgina to think of as well as you. She is already sacrificed enough to you,' he exclaimed, angrily.

'Oh, Edward!' murmured the poor woman, frightened and reproachful; and she said no more. She had put down her last card and he had trumped it.

CHAPTER XI

About sundown Alick sought his love. As a bird to its mate, the wings of his desire hurried him along. He had almost forgotten that he was going to speak to her seriously of promises and plans,

intermixed with strong warning and a little indignation. There was something wrong with Alick today; he could only think with an effort, and since Mrs. Bryant's communication his actions had been just about half voluntary.

Outside the farmhouse, Alick came upon a pretty group. Patty, fresh and comely, sat on the lowest step hemming at the spotless linen which was to be part of Nannie's dowry. The farmer smoked the pipe of peace, and listened to Caroline's voice, mellowed by the distance, as she sang sentimental ballads to her piano in the open-windowed parlour. On the green turf before them were Nannie and Joe, surrounded by a wealth of gathered flowers, which her dainty fingers were weaving into a wreath. Joe, in his working clothes with a gay necktie, looked a fine handsome lad in those level rays of the sunlight which touch with glory everything upon which they fall. He had grown fond of his youngest sister, and was watching her now with prodigious admiration as she sat among the flowers; tossing them about, tying them, and lingering lovingly over the loose yellow roses, the white pinks and lilies, the forget-me-nots and pansies, spiked lupines and scarlet lobelias. Joe was by way of helping her, and now and then she threw some falling or useless blossom at him with careless gaiety, smiling when he pricked himself or pulled

the heads off the best rosebuds with his clumsy fingers. Nannie was fair as a flower herself; her brother had adorned her little glowing head with a spray of myrtle blossom and leaf, and the girl, always with a touch of coquetry, held a blush rose against her cheek, as delicate, as pink, as transparent as its petals.

Alick paused as he came up, for his artist eye could appreciate the picture. Only somehow he saw himself in it too, a dark crooked figure against the purple fire of the sky, his back to the sun, and his longing eyes fixed on the fair girl with the flowers. And then Nannie sprang to meet him; she was apt to forget he was her lover; she thought of him as her own particular brother, even as John belonged to Patty, and Joe (in theory at least) was a retainer of Caroline. So that her greeting was warm, and they all noticed it; except Joe, who never noticed anything and had wanted to keep Nannie for himself.

Alick noticed it too, and it seemed a good omen; surely his leading was very clear! and that very morning his uncle had spoken to him and bidden the backward suitor come to terms with the girl. So presently, before them all, Alick drew Nannie's arm in his and led her away down the garden, his heart swelling with love and hope, and his jealousy forgotten. They said no word till they had reached

the bower of weeping ash, on the wooden floor of which Nannie had made Joe carve—

'Here shall we see no enemy, but winter and rough weather.'

They sat down side by side, she looking a little queen with her myrtle wreath; and it was still some minutes before he could speak. Hope was a rare visitor to Alick, and he was afraid of frightening it away.

'Nannie,' said the man at last in a low voice, 'did you ever read the first chapter of Matthew?' Nannie was on the defensive by this time, and answered flippantly—

'Yes, Alick; it has a lot of names in it. And such ugly ones. I don't like Jew names at all.'

'Do you remember, lass, about the dream Joseph had, when the angel said, "Fear not, Joseph, to take unto thee Mary thy wife"?'

'Ay. It wasn't pretty of him to need a dream lest he should think ill of her.'

'Thou would not have had Joseph refuse to obey the vision, Nannie? And Mary, thou would not have had her be disobedient?'

'It wasn't her dream, Alick. And if I had been Mary and had lived then, I'd never have married Joseph without I'd wanted to!' cried Nannie.

'Ah, lass, she was the blessed virgin and would not have gone against God's leading. I cannot

believe, Nannie, that you would want to do that. I cannot believe you mean it when you talk naughty like that!' Nannie was silent for a minute; then she said gravely, perceiving that the conversation was not to be staved off—

'No, Alick; I wouldn't go against God's will. But we don't always know what it is.'

'Nannie,' replied her lover, 'God sends visions still to people if they only look for them. He didn't end that kind of thing with Joseph and Paul and such like. God sent me a dream, Nannie,' said the preacher, with quiet certainty, 'and it had a message in it for you, just as Joseph's had for Mary.' Nannie glanced at him but kept silence. 'I saw thee, Nannie, with flowers about and around thee, as they are to-night. An angel held thy hand, lass, and brought thee to me. And we knelt together at the temple steps, and God Himself said the blessing over us; and thou wast my bride. I saw thee very clear, Nannie, and God's angel bringing thee to me. And after that we were together in a garden of Paradise; and we praised God together, and where we went there was blessing.' The girl trembled with the superstitious awe of Alick which had pervaded Everwell. She raised her hand and removed Joe's myrtle crown from her hair, throwing it on the ground; and she lifted her downcast eyes and looked at her cousin fearfully,

but said nothing. Till Alick stretched forth his hands and cried in a low voice of very human entreaty, 'Nannie, thou must come to me! I cannot go on without thee!'

'Alick, no! no!' cried the girl, much distressed, and with a feeling, terrible to her, that she had deceived him; 'oh, believe me, it wouldn't be right. I have had no dream, Alick! and oh, dreams are such shadowy things! I have to do with reality, and I cannot wed you; because—— Oh, Alick, I do! I love another.'

Nannie had not believed the confession would be so hard. She had her hand on Vincent's ring, and was trying to strengthen herself in the recollection of her dear lover's embrace on the silent hillside, and his words of faith and love which had been so good to hear. But she could not get rid of a slight feeling of guilt; and the prophet frightened her. She expected an explosion of wrath; but the effect on Alick was altogether different, and caused her a degree of wonder which increased her awe. How was it too that he seemed to know all about her and her lover?

'Nannie,' said the preacher, gravely, 'that is not love you feel for yon man, nor that he feels for you. If you and he were wedded, it would not be a marriage made in heaven, and you could not ask God's blessing on it.'

'Alick, I could,' interrupted Nannie, faintly; 'I am not afraid to speak to God of it!'

He went on unheeding.

'It's a temptation sent to try you, Nannie, and you have not yielded. You *have* discerned God's leading and have turned away. And now you must come to me, lass; and I pray God you may soon learn what true God-sent love is—better than any earthly kisses.'

'Did you know I kissed him, Alick?' murmured Nannie, with a shiver. And as he stood silently looking at her, accusingly and pityingly, with the same relentless soul-pressure that had set the people at the prayer meeting confessing their sins and beseeching mercy, she covered her face with her hands, and sobbed, and trembled, as if she had done something wrong, and was in the presence of a judge. By degrees she told him pretty nearly all that had passed between herself and Vincent, making faint efforts to defend herself, and faint efforts to resist the spell her cousin was weaving round her spirit by the mere awe of his goodness.

'Oh, Alick,' cried the poor child, 'I do not want to fight against God! Maybe you are right, and it might have been better for us all if I could have loved you. Indeed I was fond of you. I'd have been fonder if I could. If I found I had grown to love you best, I would tell *him* so. But I *will not*

go back of anything unless I am changed to him. I cannot say no more, Alick. Oh, do try to forgive me, Alick! I never meant to deceive you; and indeed, indeed there is no call for you to be angry with *him*,' she ended, anxiously.

'It's cruel work, lass, for a man to love a woman he cannot wed. Thou must not expect that of thy lovers, Nannie. If he had not been an honest man, Nannie,' said the poor gentle prophet, praying in his heart for a firm hold of that charity which believeth all things, endureth all things, 'he might have taken an advantage of thee.'

'Oh, dear Alick, you are good!' cried Nannie, impetuously, grateful for this unexpected confidence in Vincent.

Various members of the family, who had been spying after them, thought they seemed very affectionate together, and were not seriously disquieted upon hearing that the bethrothal was not exactly concluded yet, though Alick had good hopes.

Nannie cried herself to sleep that night, feeling naughty in her dear secret, and so strongly convinced of Alick's holiness that she was ready to give at least her soul to him already. And she was only seventeen, and separated far more than was wholesome from the lover to whom she had pledged her heart; and with no mother nor friend in whom she could confide. She saw no duty in telling her

father of these intricate matters, nor indeed did Alick think of betraying her confidence. If Mr. Randle were to learn about Sir Vincent, he was quite capable of flinging 'the red hair,' as he called Nannie, clean out of the window—a proceeding unlikely permanently to benefit any one.

But reaction is a law of nature; so the girl slept at last, and with a slumber rosy enough, and a dream of Vincent, and of Viola's ultimate happiness as her own. She woke telling herself that 'morning dreams come true,' and she felt most wonderfully cheered, coming down to breakfast fresh as a daisy after her short slumber, and longing for her dear lover, but more for the sake of smiles and play-making, than for tears about Alick, the awe-inspiring prophet, who had nearly persuaded her she was doing something wrong. Alick was not at all so awful to her when he was not present; and this morning the conscience-stricken feeling had passed; indeed Nannie felt ashamed of it now and had no wish to confess it to her lover, for it seemed somehow derogatory to him. But she did want to tell him that Alick had been love-making again; and that she and her cousin had arrived at what in her reactionary mood seemed to her a highly ingenious and satisfactory compromise. Namely, she was to come to no formal decision between her sweethearts for six weeks, during which Alick was to treat her

absolutely as a sister, and she in return for this forbearance was to be much in his society and to aid him in his missionary work; at the end of the probation he was to ask her again and to accept her answer—'No,' of course it would be—as absolutely final; so all her trouble with him would be ended.

Sir Vincent came in that morning to see Mr. Randle about the pure streamlet he wanted to connect with the village, and when the long and, to Nannie, very dull conversation was over, and the gentleman was going away, he stepped to the window, where Caroline and Nannie were busy ironing, and said a few pleasant words, regarded by the elder sister as an attention entirely to herself. Nevertheless Nannie found means to whisper without raising her eyes, 'I want to speak to you some time,' and Vincent answered in the same tone, 'This evening in the glen.' Then he rode away, and for the first time they had the delightful excitement of an assignation.

CHAPTER XII

VINCENT, however, was not allowed to go to the tryst, so innocently requested and so gladly

granted without a strong reminder that he had bound himself in nowise to bring the confiding child to harm. He received a visit from Alick.

It was a much calmer interview than their last upon the same subject. They had both grown older and it was to be hoped wiser since then. Alick to-day had himself so well in hand, and spoke with so much feeling, earnestness, and sincerity of purpose, that Vincent could not choose but listen, and indeed with respect. Truly the Christian graces of charity and forbearance sat well upon the prophet! Yet Alick spoke plainly enough.

'I was always afraid of you with her, sir. My eyes were opened to see there was something in your mind long ago; and it was the good spirit moved me when I asked you to promise there should never be no courting between you and her. And now after all you have deceived me!'

'I gave you no promise,' said Vincent; but he was touched, and added, 'There has been no courting of the sort you feared then between Nannie and me. It was out of the question with *her;* but I think you were right to warn me, and I am glad to have the opportunity of thanking you for doing so. We are on a different footing now, and you must allow me to say I have as much right to press my suit upon Nannie as have you or any other honest man.'

'No, sir,' said Alick, gravely but respectfully, 'it don't make your conduct right. There can't be no propriety in love-making between Nannie and you. She ain't fit to be your wife, and you know it better than she. If you asked her, it was because your conscience made you do it after kissing her. You knew, being the girl she is, she'd say No. You weren't prepared to have her say Yes, and I doubt if she had, you'd have found out quick enough as the thing was impossible, and you wasn't able to carry it through.' There was a sort of terrible substratum of truth in all this, and Vincent did not answer without reflection.

'You are wrong if you think I am not ready to face the responsibilities of the step I have taken,' he said, quietly.

'Sir,' said Alick, 'I was presumptuous in telling you she was promised to me, when she hadn't given me her word; but I am not surer of my own salvation than I am sure that I am bidden to take Nannie Randle for my wife.'

'I feel a repugnance to that kind of speech,' replied Vincent; 'you cannot take her against her will.'

'Sir, if ever you had heard the heavenly voice, telling you what to do you would not dare to disobey. Am I to resist the will of my God, because one who could give her no happiness, and who isn't,

I'm afraid, set before all things on walking with her along the heavenly path, and who wouldn't for her sake deny himself the pleasure of a kiss and a soft word and a promise which he knew in his heart he couldn't keep—am I to resist God's will because that man has stolen my girl's heart from me?'

Vincent answered kindly—'That is all nonsense, you know, about voices and visions. Neither you nor I have a shadow of right to coerce her. A true lover would give her up to the man she loves, and wish with his whole heart for her happiness.' He held out his hand with his pleasant smile and signified that the interview was ended. Not so, thought Alick.

'It's easy to talk of what a lover should do, sir, but I haven't heard so much as that you do love her yet. I doubt she's no more to you than a pretty lass who could give you a bit of pleasure; and you think it would be enough if you gave her a bit of pleasure for a while too. You don't consider as how she'd be miserable afterwards with a husband who was ashamed of her, and stuck up among folk who thought her a forward hussy, as let herself be bought dear or cheap, it don't matter which, by a man who was bound to tire of her.'

'Come, Alick, we have said enough. I can't listen to such words of Nannie.'

'Ay, you gentlefolk are mighty careful what you

say of other folk. But you have your thoughts in your hearts, I reckon. You'll be thinking worse of Nannie some day and treating her according, though now you fancy me uncivil because I say aloud she may be vain, and a bit light, and worked upon like other women, by the world, and the flesh, sir, if not by the devil. For all I say that, I love her and I think more highly on her than you do; and it's because I think most of her real happiness and her growing up a good woman in the place God has put her, that I'd save her from a bit of folly now, as might drive her in the end to perdition. And if you think she wouldn't be willing, sir—why you know she has turned away from you like a brave lass, and as things are with us, there ain't no one she can turn to but me. If you go pursuing after her and teaching her to overcome her better self, which knows she shouldn't be thinking and lusting after you that God has separated from her by breeding and station and all your ways of thought, then it's *you* will be forcing her, and not giving her her free will and her right to choose, not the man she fancies maybe, but the man whom God has appointed for her, and whose love is strong enough to help her even against herself. You'll pardon me, if I have said too much, sir,' ended the prophet.

Within sound of such earnestness, eloquent in

its simplicity, Vincent felt himself a dumb idiot. But then he had heard no holy voices, and was not nearly so certain as Alick of his own wisdom.

'Nannie has not turned from me so decidedly as you think,' he replied; 'but I will remember what you have said, and will think it over before I speak to her next and while she and I are together.'

And he did so. It is confusing work trying to disentangle one's own interests and desires from those of other people. But Vincent did ask himself very seriously a question which ever afterwards retained in his mind its importance. Had he been thinking enough of sweet Nannie's happiness? or had his hesitation been mainly about semi-imaginary dangers to himself?

Well, he would not coerce her. He would continue to see and speak to her as opportunity served; but perhaps for the present, it were well to pose rather as friend than lover. However, he only said, 'perhaps'; and unfortunately that kind of resolution has small chance of being acted upon, unless very firmly fixed indeed. One tender glance from a pair of soft, sweet eyes can prove it an absurdity.

CHAPTER XIII

THEIR greeting was one of great stiffness and propriety, and Nannie tried not to smile. But without looking at him Nannie knew he was smiling at her, and the thing was infectious. They even laughed a little, they were in each other's presence so ridiculously and completely happy. Nannie in her reactionary mood could be nothing but joyous to-night. She could make nothing tragic out of her confession about Alick, and Vincent was by far the more circumspect and serious of the two. But every time they met now he was finding in her some new charm; yesterday the depth of tenderness and gentle thought in her starry eyes; to-night their innocent sparkle and girlish glee.

'I can't help Alick teasing me once again'—so ended her long tale, 'but I do think he will let me alone after that! You aren't angry with me, are you?' she whispered, coaxingly, looking up into his eyes.

'Will you meet me every day for six weeks too?' asked Vincent, looking down into hers.

'Oh no! But don't you see, sir, Alick has promised not to talk to me about those things.'

'What things?' said the lover, putting his

finger on her happy dimple. Nannie lifted it away, but let her hand linger for a moment round the intrusive finger.

'The things you like talking to me about,' said Nannie, very demurely.

He laughed. 'That is Alick's method of courting all the same; it is not fair to give him so much advantage. Such strong doses of prudence and theology will be taking effect upon you, Nannie.'

'Do you mean I oughtn't to listen?'

'You ought to let me sometimes administer an antidote.'

'What is that?'

'Here is one,' said Vincent, touching her cheek with his lips; 'seriously, my Nannie, I don't like it. Alick is a powerful fellow. He makes the tables and chairs run after him, and he has too much influence over you already. We shall be quarrelling about him some day. Oh yes! I see my ring on your finger now; but it wasn't there this morning. It would be better for us both if you wore it openly.'

'But——'

'I know what you mean by "but." Listen, Nannie; I have been scolded by this Alick, and I am in a horribly unromantic mood to-night. I have been thinking things over, which is always dangerous. Our promise to each other, Nannie, is

not definite enough to be very binding. The ring only means we are allowing ourselves that degree of intimacy which a probability of future ties may render justifiable.' Nannie looked frightened.

'I said I knew I oughtn't to bind *you*,' she said.

'I am not referring to myself. It is not I who am not ready to be bound; it is *you*. This is not at all the way I like talking to you, Nannie, but it must be done; unless you will solemnly pledge yourself now, my treasure, to marry me? That would be the best way, my sweet one.' She shook her head.

'Still afraid? Then, Nannie, it comes to this: you are at liberty to chuck me over any day and go off and marry somebody else; and I have no claim to assert; and, I suppose, no right to be angry,' said Vincent, gazing at her anxiously.

'But I shall not do that. I shall never marry —*any one else*,' she added in a whisper.

'Then, if you mean it, you must be careful what you do about Alick. You can't have two sweethearts, that is all.'

Some spirit of mockery seemed to come into Nannie, for a suppressed smile played deliciously round her lips.

'What does it all mean?' she asked. Vincent took her hands in his.

'It means, dear Nannie, that our present relation

is too undecided and fantastic to last; we may manage it for a little time, but soon it is bound to change into something firmer—separation; or a close and a dear bond, betrothal, Nannie. If you mean it to be that, I won't have you flirting with Alick; if you mean it to be separation you shouldn't be flirting with me,' and he drew her head down on his shoulder.

'Maybe you had better not kiss me any more,' said Nannie, with smiling eyes. Then she pouted her rosy lips in an inviting sort of way, and Vincent had not been human if he had not answered the remark by kissing them at once. 'But what am I to do, if I want to speak to you?' said the girl; 'how could we have said all this with Caroline listening?'

'How indeed?'

'Is all that flirting with you, sir?'

'Yes; horrible flirting.'

'What is flirting with Alick, please, sir? You don't suppose he kisses me?'

'I am sure I hope not.'

'If I wanted to speak to him, I might ask him to meet me here perhaps.'

'Really?'

'If he wanted to speak to me, I should listen. Mayn't I do all that?'

'I don't want to make rules, silly child.'

'Wouldn't it be very unfortunate if we took

up different ideas of what flirting with Alick is?'

'Very. It is exactly what I am afraid of.'

'You mustn't go getting jealous all about nothing,' said Nannie, with her regal air.

'You acknowledge then, sweet one, that I have a right to be jealous?' He drew her in his arms. 'Nannie, we are not pledged yet; but I mean to have you some day!'

'I wish it was some day now!' breathed Nannie.

'If it isn't a promise, little coquette, it is the next thing to it,' said Vincent.

'I think you are silly to be so jealous,' she replied, imperiously.

He thought so too at the moment; but days of separation followed, and the insolidity of the fantastic bond roused his fears again. Alick had so many opportunities of strengthening his influence; he himself so few, and those so difficult and almost, it seemed, tinged with guilt.

PART VI

THE TURN OF THE TIDE

CHAPTER I

THE days passed on making no very perceptible change for any one. Alick continued to fast and to pray and to preach, now and then working a miracle or two, to the delight of his followers and the comfort of his own soul. In the face of much visible improvement in the manners of the fishing population, no one cared to criticise over-much the methods of the reformer. And neither Alick himself nor any one else observed that he was beginning to look haggard and overstrained, as if his frail earthly part could scarce endure so much activity of the spirit. For himself he was quite happy; he had a position like that of Isaiah or Ezekiel; and Nannie was good to him; and at the end of the appointed time God would give him his bride; for prayer still seemed to Alick as a Wishing Cap; and all doubt of its efficacy, irreverence.

As to Nannie, she thought the complication with Alick all but at an end; he had subsided into his proper position of friend, brother, and spiritual

adviser. The girl was perfectly contented to go on for ever as things were. She and Sir Vincent continued to meet sometimes; and oh how delicious those secret meetings were to him no less than to her! The one only thing that vexed Nannie at this time was her dear lover's impatience to have his darling with him always; and was not that just the very prettiest source of vexation that any one could possibly think of? Nannie did not really want to be without it; she was happy as a queen.

But Vincent himself was far more impatient than he dared to tell Nannie, and that not merely because his passion was daily deepening and increasing. The fact was he had begun to recognise the scenery of By-path Meadow and had grown anxious to be out of it. The stolen meetings, the endearing words, and innocent embraces left Vincent restless and unhappy; he felt his present relation to the gentle girl unexplainable if not dangerous; secrecy and concealments were abhorrent to his nature. Moreover, though their intercourse was far too affectionate to suppose the delicate-minded Nannie's intention doubtful, Vincent did not feel sure that its fulfilment was certain. The truce with Alick seemed to him abnormal and to be distrusted; he had vague fears of family influence and atmosphere, and a positive dread of that detestable monster Common-sense, which indeed he only kept down himself by vigilance and force, and

a constant strengthening of his spirit in the beauty of the beloved. Meanwhile the sweet stolen interviews continued.

One evening, and those summer evenings at Everwell tempt out the laziest, Vincent met Georgina and her father taking a late ramble together.

Miss Bryant quickly discovered that the recusant was hurried as he answered her airy speeches; and then noticing that he disappeared in the direction of the farmhouse glen, she contrived after an interval to lead her father by the same path. 'Mrs. Bryant wants some moss for her rockery,' said the good-natured stepdaughter. After a time she paused, to draw breath he supposed.

'I did not know you could climb so well, Georgie,' said Mr. Bryant.

'Hush, papa,' whispered Georgina. 'We must not intrude upon those people,' and she pointed to a big boulder-stone below; 'look; down there in the shadow.'

'Why, that is Vincent!' exclaimed Mr. Bryant, impulsively. He regretted the speech at once. 'The grass is very damp, Georgie,' he said, 'I think we had better be returning now. Come away, my dear. I—I am very anxious to get home.'

Georgina could have laughed at her father's discomfiture. But she threw her moss away with well-acted agitation, and then hung wearily on his arm, her head drooping.

'My dearest child, what is the matter?' he asked, affectionately, hearing a sob.

'Oh, papa'—brokenly—'did you see?'

'Why yes, Georgie, I did.' Mr. Bryant made light of it. 'No doubt Vincent thought he ought to speak to one of his tenants.'

'Such a pretty one? And put his arm round her, papa?'

'No. That would be most improper. I saw nothing of that sort, Georgina. They were talking too much perhaps. Give him a laughing lecture Georgie.'

'Oh, papa! I am so unhappy. I didn't think he would amuse himself with a girl of that sort. He is not what I thought'—sob—'I am sometimes afraid he has been only amusing himself with me'—dreadful sobs—'oh! my heart will break! After all he has said to me—since I came here—yesterday even. I can't bear it!'

'If Leicester has been making love to you, Georgie,' said Mr. Bryant, hotly, 'we shall soon bring him to the point. He is upright, I am convinced. But, my dear Georgina, I was afraid—he had not always been quite so affectionate as my silly little woman had expected.'

'Papa, I know; not when people were looking. I have wondered sometimes. But when we have been alone'—sobs—'I am beginning to be afraid

he has only been *amusing* himself. And now to see him with a horrid girl like that—but indeed Mrs. Bryant had told me——'

'What did Emma tell you? My dear child, you are mistaken about Vincent. I have faith in him. If he has been paying you attention, I am sure his intentions are serious,' said the clergyman, with emphasis.

But Mr. Bryant was far more disturbed than he chose to admit to Georgina, for anything in which Nannie appeared as an agent assumed at once enormous and odious importance in his eyes. The idea of her being Georgina's rival for two minutes! That beautiful damsel went to her room in tears, saying she was too much upset to come down again. She locked her door, put on her dressing-gown, and sat down with the greatest interest to alter a bonnet. Mr. Bryant sought his wife.

'What is this about Vincent Leicester and that girl Nannie? really, Emma, if you had anything to say, you ought to have spoken on such a subject to me, not to Georgina.'

'I never said one word to Georgie about Nannie!' cried Mrs. Bryant, astounded.

'You did about Leicester then. You knew he was making a fool of himself with that girl?'

'Oh dear, Edward, who has told you about it? It can't be going on still!'

'Why, we saw them together! Not good taste on his part, I must say. It's just a vulgar flirtation, I suppose? The last thing I should have expected of Leicester. You can't mean there is any serious entanglement? Why, the man is engaged to Georgina! It is scandalous!'

'I don't know what we have to go upon in thinking he's engaged to Georgie,' said Mrs. Bryant · whose ideas and wishes about Vincent had been getting a little undecided during the last week or two.

'He has made her in love with him! That's what it comes to. You have no conception of that child's depth of feeling, Emma. She is naturally much upset by this stupid exhibition of his. I can't have my girl trifled with,' said Mr. Bryant, getting hot. 'He shall be made to declare himself.'

'I'm a deal more afraid of his trifling with some one else. Oh, Ned, don't you see, now, how necessary it is I should take care of her?'

'Well!' exclaimed the clergyman, 'I always knew she was a deceitful, forward minx; it is proved now.' Mrs. Bryant was alarmed.

'Oh my, Ned! What were they doing?'

'Doing? Nothing when we saw them; only talking there in the glen by themselves. I didn't think anything of it, except that he'd have been

better away. It is *you*, Emma, who lead me to suppose there is something serious. Come now, tell me all you know.'

'I haven't rested day nor night since I found out,' said the mother. 'Poor dear, *she* doesn't know what she's doing! She told me of it herself.'

'How far has it gone? What did she tell you?'

'She told me he had made love to her and wanted to marry her.'

'You believed that gammon?' said Mr. Bryant, who was getting more angry every minute. 'Well, now you ought to be convinced what she is. Oh, it isn't the first I have heard of her conduct, I can tell you! Come now, Emma, as you take an extravagant interest in this young woman, I beg you'll exert your influence to get her out of the place. We can't have Leicester behaving in this way. It's the sort of thing would damage him immeasurably.'

'Oh, Edward, you are very cruel. If you would only care a little for the poor dear child, and try to help *her!*'

'I am too old for sentimentality. When a girl takes to that kind of behaviour, it's precious little any one can do for her.'

'I can't think, Edward,' said Mrs. Bryant, rising, 'how you can speak so to *me*, when it's about *her*, and when you know that much the very same happened to *me*, and yet you thought me good enough to be

your own wife; and I have been a good wife to you, and you know it!'

This reproof sobered the angry man somewhat.

'My dear, you were innocent from beginning to end of that nefarious transaction. I do not expect to meet your likeness in every vain, flaunting, unprincipled——'

'Edward, I will not endure it! She is my child!' He stamped his foot.

'You are mad, Emma, to go on referring in this way to what is obliterated.'

Mrs. Bryant joined her hands in supplicating misery. 'Edward, once before you wanted to make me deceive. You wanted to pretend I wasn't never Emma Randle. It found us out. Every one here has had to learn that I was Emma Randle. And this other will find us out too.'

But her pleading was vain. Mr. Bryant had embarked on a voyage of deception, and it is the peculiarity of that excursion that the return journey cannot be accomplished without shipwreck. He resolved to press on, disregarding minor accidents such as mere quarrels with his wife or injustice to an innocent girl; if indeed Nannie were innocent. He hated her so much that he couldn't believe it.

CHAPTER II

Mr. Bryant, however, had embarked on this voyage with a good deal of conscience as cargo. His conscience told him that to fulfil his duty to his own former pupil, to the detestable Nannie, and to his beloved daughter, he must take some notice of the vulgar, disastrous, and no doubt guilty intrigue the young man seemed to have drifted into. Mr. Bryant was no bad hand at reproving a fisherman or a costermonger. He had before now given Vincent Leicester and his peers many a pleasant hint or friendly expostulation, which had cost him no special pains and had not been unsalutary in effect. But those days of straightforward independence were gone by. Mr. Bryant wanted the baronet to marry his daughter, and he had to think twice before offending a man of that quality.

He was unfortunate in the moment he chose for his delicate task, for Vincent was in the middle of a little altercation with his mother; the subject, his uncle Frederick Kane, who had turned up again and seemed to the impatient nephew to have no intention of ever going away.

'It is so unfortunate, dear,' said the gentle lady, 'that you should have to take so much decided

action when you have so little experience. I wish you would let your uncle *advise* you a little.'

'My uncle confuses and demoralises me,' exclaimed Vincent, 'and I'll be hanged if I stand him!' Vincent as a matter of fact was in the right, as Lady Katharine would have been the first to acknowledge had she ever understood her brother; but the widow could not approve her son's manner. In her day young people had always treated their elders with great deference, and though slow to admit evil of any one, she did think her son and a great many of his friends sometimes inclined 'to forget themselves.'

'It is your own house, Vincent,' she said, stiffly. And for five minutes the son sulked too, and considered—for five minutes—that his mother was a difficult person to get on with. And before the five minutes were over in came Mr. Bryant, with his censures and good advice.

He never produced either. Vincent flung up his head long before a hint of Nannie had come into the conversation, and Mr. Bryant did not dare the risk. Even at the cost of neglecting his duty, and perhaps harming the soul of his distinguished parishioner, the clergyman resolved to hold his peace. His patron might snub him; and to a man who has risen a snub is apt to prove fatal. He resolved to combat the young man's departure from

propriety by underground means. So he talked away pleasantly; unwittingly reconciled the mother and son; and was introduced to Mr. Kane, who was most affable, and won Mr. Bryant's heart completely, as indeed an 'honourable' gentleman was pretty sure to do. There was a conversation after Lady Katharine's own heart about sermons and sacraments; how she wished her dear boy could interest himself in such things like her dear brother! Vincent was nearly wild with annoyance; at his innocent mother, his cynical uncle with his tongue in his cheek, and at Mr. Bryant, who would not see he was being befooled. It was very irritating that Mr. Bryant should be ridiculed at all; worse that he should lay himself open in this way to ridicule: mortifying to the young man's vanity that Mr. Kane should detect in two minutes the clergyman's weak side, which was only now becoming undoubtedly apparent to the nephew. Vincent caught himself wishing that he had followed precedents and replaced Cousin Septimius by Cousin Augustine, of the expectations and the priggish disposition.

But the solemn talk about Chrysostom and Archbishop Leighton went on till Mr. Bryant, having to hurry away and being flattered into a state of intoxication, invited Mr. Kane to dinner, that so the interrupted conversation might have conclusion; and Vincent could hardly restrain himself when the

invitation was accepted. He pictured poor Mrs. Bryant under the visitor's sarcasm, and could have kicked the clergyman for exposing her to it.

Mr. Bryant, however, went home in high good humour, and expatiated so much on the honourable gentleman's affability and pedigree, that Georgina tossed her head and said pettishly, 'Dear me, papa! you seem to think I don't know who anybody is.' Nevertheless the young lady was pleased to think Mr. Kane was coming to dinner, and she resolved to captivate him. He might be useful with Vincent.

'I will wear blue muslin,' she reflected, 'for sweet simplicity is what pleases elderly men. Boys prefer satin and Venetian point. At Sir Vincent's age it seems that stuff petticoats and thick shoes are the attraction. I wish papa had told me what he was going to do with that minx.' For Georgina quite recognised her father's difficulty. Nannie must be suppressed quietly. If Vincent's name got mixed up in a scandal, no virtuous clergyman could favour him as an immediate candidate for his daughter; and there was the risk too of offending the erring gentleman himself by direct action. 'The idea of his preferring red hair!' said Miss Bryant in great wrath, as she petted her brown plaits lovingly. 'But how silly he is! He may have all the red hair and all the stuff petticoats in the world for aught I care, if he doesn't put the

creatures out of their place. I have read the Bible. The moment Hagar got into Sarah's way she was turned out; that is what I must see done to this horrid little Hagar. I am really in love with Vincent, I believe. If I had to choose between him and some notable prince, I fancy I should stick to Vincent; always provided I was certain of getting him. If he goes flourishing Hagar in this way before my very eyes, he mustn't be surprised if I accept the first eligible offer that turns up. But in this hole of a place there is no one to make an offer. This Mr. Kane? He is no good; he has no money; I am certain aunt told me he had a wife—black, I suppose—and a nest of fledglings somewhere in the States. *Je n'aime pas ça du tout, du tout, du tout.* But he may be of use to me with Vincent. I see clearly I must be civil.' So she sewed fresh ribbons on the blue muslin, smiling and feeling equal to conquering all the men in the world. She had a firm belief in herself, and always fancied Helen, Cleopatra, and all other irresistible women must have had just her face, her voice, her charming manner, and false smile.

Half an hour before the aristocratic guest was expected, Georgina contrived to reduce her stepmother to tears; by Georgina's advice Mrs. Bryant had arrayed herself in her second best gown, and the young lady now expressed astonishment to find it was

a rather soiled yellow satin carved out with black lace. 'It is not becoming,' said the girl, staring mercilessly; and after the flood of tears alluded to, which was very provoking to Mr. Bryant, disturbed already by his wife's apparel, Georgina said with mock sympathy—

'Now, papa, I think it is cruel to make Mrs. Bryant come down to-night. She really looks too ill to appear.'

'Kind little girl!' said the clergyman, relieved. 'Do what you like, my dear Emma;' and he kissed her, lest she should be hurt by her dismissal. She was by the manner of it; for Georgie had explained to her that in the language of the world 'How ill you look!' always means 'How ugly!'

CHAPTER III

Mr. Kane, malicious and fond of comedy, had accepted the clergyman's invitation not from any wish to study theology, but because on Sunday he had recognised Mr. Bryant's face, and, after some racking of his brains, had recalled to mind a smart lad in an apron behind a grocer's counter in a country town many years ago.

'Your parson seems a good man,' Mr. Kane

remarked to Lady Katharine on the way home; 'one of the Norfolk Bryants?'

'Yes, I believe so,' said the widow; 'but oh, Frederick, it is so unfortunate—he has a very curious wife; it makes such an awkwardness——' And then she went on to praise Georgina with pointed effusion.

'The parson's must be a singular household,' observed Mr. Kane, drily. 'I didn't know I should find a comedy theatre here. Vincent has, I see, a fine understanding of the needs of life. Hallo! there goes the beauty with the red hair. She runs Miss Bryant hard. Is that showy girl with her a sister? Another beauty, I declare. Katharine, have you studied history?'

'History?'

'Such a work as Gibbon's *Decline and Fall?* You will learn from it that when a young prince surrounded himself with comedians and beauties, he was in a dangerous position.' Lady Katharine smiled, without understanding her playful brother's joke. 'I should dismiss Miss Bryant at any rate,' he whispered, glancing at his nephew; 'your dear boy will get on better without such very handsome young women worshipping him. There is a hint for you, my sister,' said Mr. Kane. And he went to dine with the parson to spy out the land.

A very pleasant dinner it proved, the vulgar wife being out of the way. The conversation was

brilliant, and the young lady a model of grace. Mr. Kane was much at his ease, having a liking for handsome women; indeed, under favourable circumstances he might have fallen in love with Georgina himself.

'The child's easy, perfect manner is delightful,' said Mr. Bryant, in a frenzy of delight, having run up after dinner to see his wife.

'I like girls a bit more distant,' said Mrs. Bryant, tired of Georgina's praises.

But after the handsome daughter had retired Mr. Kane lingered for half an hour with the clergyman; and felt the time had come to put out his claws. He would unmask the pretentious fool. With a man like Mr. Bryant any degree of rudeness was justifiable.

Mr. Kane began by admiring Georgina. 'Did I hear a rumour,' he said, lazily watching his smoke (Mr. Bryant hated smoke, but was willing to sacrifice himself for any one connected with the nobility), 'that she and my nephew were engaged?'

The clergyman's proud heart beat, but he had modestly to deny the report. There had certainly been a passage between the young people, but——

Mr. Kane sat up straight and defied his host. 'Oh, Vincent has drawn back, has he? I suppose he had become aware——'

'Of what, sir?' asked the clergyman with outward calm, but noting the change of manner, and

sitting up in his turn. Mr. Kane laughed disagreeably and did not reply at once. Mr. Bryant felt himself crimsoning without knowing what to expect.

'When did you leave Karley-le-Street, Mr. Bryant?' asked the guest; and so plainly did the name of the country town mean 'grocer's shop' that the clergyman believed the offensive epithet had been actually used. A slap on the face could not have disconcerted him more thoroughly. For once he had no reply ready, and Mr. Kane chuckled with delight.

'I had no idea it was a secret,' he continued; 'pray don't be alarmed. I will not betray you. But I remembered your face so well. Had my nephew some other reason then for drawing——'

'The drawing back, sir,' interrupted the clergyman, with dignity, 'has been on Miss Bryant's side. I should require to know Sir Vincent's character better before I could entertain his proposals for my daughter. He may not be her equal in worth though her superior in position.'

This was all very well; still Mr. Kane, seeing the man he had to do with, pushed his point. 'I should be sorry,' he said, 'by my accidental recognition to make your position here disagreeable.'

Mr. Bryant reversed his tactics. The man was odious.

'You mistake me, Mr. Kane. Sir Vincent is welcome to know the whole history of my family. Has he not told you that my wife's brother, Mr. Randle, is farming in this place?'

'Did you say Randle?' asked Mr. Kane. The clergyman, absorbed in restoring his own shattered dignity, did not notice if his guest now seemed curiously interested, perhaps startled. Mr. Kane did not finish his cigar. After all that plain speaking they could not fall back into compliment or theology. Mr. Bryant thought he seemed almost a little flurried at his departure.

After turning that bit of talk round and round in his mind, the vicar of Everwell came to the conclusion that it had been not only humiliating but menacing. The foreseen opposition to the marriage on the part of Sir Vincent's relations had begun.

He talked it over rather explosively with his wife; who felt in arms against all the ladies and gentlemen in the neighbourhood, and especially against this Mr. Kane, supposed too fine to sit at table with her.

'What I want to know, Emma, is how he has learnt so much about *me!* I never saw or heard of the man before. Now, did you?'

'I hear of Lady Katharine's brother? I never knew she had one.'

'I shall ask Ben.'

'Oh dear, what does it matter?' cried Emma, peevishly.

'He seemed to have heard of Ben. I wish you would think, my dear.'

'I always told you, Ned, that some one was sure to mention the shop some day,' said Emma. 'There was no good in hiding it.'

'I have never hidden it!' said Mr. Bryant, angrily. 'You are very testy about Mr. Kane, my dear.'

'You lived a deal nearer Lord Henslow's than we did, Ned. Ben, nor I, nor none of us knew anything of the family, except Lady Katharine, because she married Sir Charles. Oh dear, Ned, I do think if you'd had any sense, you'd never have come to this place, to mix me up with grand folk I had seen as a girl.'

'I believe you are right there, my love. Well, we must go away as soon as we can; but we can't go till we have a home somewhere else; and till—till——' He was referring to Georgina's marriage of course. 'Mr. Kane is inclined to be antagonistic,' he said, musingly.

'Oh do, for goodness sake, stop about Mr. Kane!' cried Emma; 'you have gone quite crazy, Ned, about grand people.'

He felt rebuked, and was silent. Emma's unwillingness to discuss the visitor had, however,

annoyed him, and he imagined a hundred complicated reasons to account for it.

CHAPTER IV

THERE are not many well-conducted houses in the United Kingdom where Sunday is a thoroughly comfortable day; for great survival of Puritanism dogs the serious of all persuasions like a shadow.

Of course to clergymen and others who have taken up religion as a profession, Sunday is a feast of grinding labour; to preach three, or even two, sermons within twelve hours is no joke. Nor is the seventh a day of rest to the clergyman's daughter. Such an one I have known: a slim girl of eighteen, who goes fasting to early communion; returns three quarters of a mile for a hasty breakfast; then teaches, as she calls it, some fifteen inattentive Sunday scholars, who have come to school as a favour. She has time to swallow a jujube before church, where she plays the organ and leads the singing, and tries to stay awake during her father's sermon lest he should catechise her about it at the hasty dinner which follows the return home; then comes another Sunday school, longer and hotter and noisier than the morning one, after which Isabel has

charge of her little brothers and sisters in the schoolroom for two hours, to relieve the governess. And then there is church again at half-past six; and after church, her father being a very zealous clergyman, there is hymn-singing or other religious dissipation in the parish room, at which Isabel has the harmonium of course, and the general superintendence of flaring and odorous paraffin lamps, wet umbrellas and greasy hats, of old men who fall asleep and by their snores introduce the ridiculous, youths who paraphrase the words of the hymns and ogle the girls, while these latter giggle and lean across each other to whisper that Miss Isabel has a new bonnet and Jim Smith is cultivating whiskers. At last Isabel gets home to supper, and papa has brought the curate with him, who is good and nice and rather in love with Isabel, but who is not brilliant, and whose idea of conversation is that she shall find all the subjects, make all the jests, and advise him what to read at the next Temperance meeting. Papa kisses his darling when she goes to bed, and hopes she has had a happy day, and Isabel says dutifully Yes; but bursts into tears as she reads her chapter at night in the solitude of her very chilly bedroom, feeling keenly in her physically weakened condition that she is an unprofitable servant much threatened by the prophet Isaiah. Such things I have seen, and in more than

one English parsonage; but it is needless to remark not at Everwell, for Georgina Bryant was not made on the pattern of my gentle and dutiful Isabel.

Many people there are too who do not work so desperately hard, and who yet feel rather low-spirited and weary by the time for bed. Lady Katharine Leicester, for instance, though she would not have said so for the world, never found a straight-backed pew, with its sitting board covered by a thin carpet, at all the same as the nice arm-chair in which she reposed in her drawing-room. But she always went twice to church, because she got tired of reading sermons or making Sunday talk at home. And though she attempted no positive interference with her son's pursuits, she indulged him sadly, and always wanted him to be doing something else 'when the servants came in.' Vincent laughed at her and took his own way of course, but the unspoken disapproval bored him, and he liked to get out of the house on Sunday, in his little boat alone on the dancing waves, or far away over the moors on his good steed, Pegasus.

'How pretty he is!' said Nannie, one August evening, timidly touching the fiery nostrils as Vincent drew bridle to speak to Mr. Randle, who with his large family, and Alick his nephew, was sunning himself and feeling important in his Sunday best.

Vincent had been staying with his grandfather for a week, and it was ten days since he had even seen Nannie.

'Were you ever on a horse?' he asked her.

'Oh yes! I used to climb up on the colts and ride them about the fields! But I should have been frightened if they had stamped and snorted like this one.'

Alick got a vision then of a picture he remembered long ago: a field with a low hedge and a few pollarded oaks, in one corner a little pond reflecting the sunset; and the white, spirit-like figure of a slim child seated erect on a dark, bare-backed galloping thing, long-legged, awkward, half-frightened; the girl with white arms clutching the mane, slender ankles pressed to the panting sides, her hair streaming on the wind, her eyes gleaming, and her lips half open to drink in the flying breeze. And he turned and frowned strangely at the decorous maiden by his side, Bible in hand and all her wealth of rich locks softly coiled up and nearly hidden under her Sunday bonnet. But *she* smiled at her dear lover, and Vincent smiled too. He was thinking he would like to pick Nannie up and gallop away with her in the summer sunshine. Her afternoon's destiny was different.

Later, Vincent, returning from his ride and picking his way cautiously over the flat rocks

deserted by the tide, came upon a group of the fisher folk assembled here on the beach, with Alick in their midst and Nannie beside him holding his arm. They were singing one of the sweetest of all modern hymns, and the Everwell voices, unaccompanied save by the lapping of the little waves, were rich and true, the words falling quite clear and distinct from Alick's lips as he led the song. Vincent paused to listen, not liking his Nannie standing up there so importantly with the crazy prophet.

My Father's house on high,
Home of my soul, how near
At times to faith's far-seeing eye
Thy golden gates appear!
Here in the body pent,
Absent from Him I roam,
Yet nightly pitch my moving tent,
A day's march nearer home.
Nearer home! A day's march nearer home.

The meeting broke up after this, but the people, all quiet and orderly, lingered round Alick; and Nannie, the little Mary Anne clinging to her gown, stole aside to say a word to her lover.

'Have you come through the village, sir? Don't you think it is very different from what it was that Sunday last year when Alick took you round? It is all his doing!' she said, proudly, just as long ago she had talked of his drawings.

Vincent had indeed been struck by the changed aspect of the many once brutal faces; but he admitted the improvement grudgingly. He had grown to loathe speaking to Nannie with this public indifference, when even a moment's solitude meant kisses and her dear hand clasped in his and pressed to his heart. As he rode he had been saying to himself, 'I cannot and will not go on with it. It is derogatory to *her*. While I loved her just a little, it was possible—pleasant; now it is torture; it is wrong—it is unendurable.' This suppressed emotion made his aspect sombre; and at Nannie's words new cause of offence arose. Why did she praise Alick in this way to him?

'Don't you get tired of the psalm-singing, Nannie?' he asked, abruptly.

'Sometimes,' replied the girl, 'but I know I am wrong.'

'Why?'

'Because,' she answered, colouring nervously, 'religion *is* the chief thing; and it *is* right to—to pray.' Vincent took her up sharply.

'Religion is only the sum total of our daily lives; and prayer, Nannie, is no more than the cry of the soul.' She looked up with her quick perception and sympathy, but made no answer. And she rejoined her cousin, feeling conspicuous standing there with her sweetheart. Vincent's idea of conspicuous-

ness was different, and his heart beat with annoyance as she left him. He had not known that she was connecting herself with Alick in this public way; and when he had seen her last she had been playfully unwilling to be catechised as to her management of the rejected and pertinacious admirer; and he had gone away smiling, and telling himself that, like all other women, she was a desperate little coquette. But Vincent did not smile to-night. Good Heavens! if his fears were to be realised and she were after all to slip away from him!

Vincent lingered, his horse's bridle over his arm and his air that of one wanting to pick a quarrel with some one. 'Why weren't you gathered in the schoolhouse this afternoon, Alick?' he asked, for something to say. Unwittingly he had touched upon a sore subject, and the prophet's aspect of heavenly exaltation suddenly vanished. He answered excitedly—

'Sir, the door was shut. The parson has turned against me and would have me speak to the people no more. And,' he cried, his eye flashing, 'yon heathen parson had put a purple table-cover on the church's holy table, and flowers and candles, as they have in the popish chapel by Tanswick. I took them away last night, but I doubt, sir, it's the beginning of the end.'

'How do you mean you took them away?' asked Vincent.

'I was bidden to do it, sir,' shouted Alick; 'if there is heathendom in Everwell, the Lord's hand will be turned away from us.'

'You will go at once, if you please, and put the things, whatever they are, back in their places.'

'No, sir; I threw them in the sea,' said Alick. Vincent surveyed him in astonishment, for this was the prophet in quite a new aspect.

'You did?'

'I will serve God rather than man,' said Alick.

'Don't be angry with him,' whispered Nannie, softly, and Vincent flashed an impatient look at her, the first she had ever had from him. What did she mean by setting herself on Alick's side in this way? The man seemed, under his present aspect, as distorted, as repulsive, as the uncompromising dissenter has generally appeared to the child of the world, ever since the days of Roundhead and Cavalier when the dissenters for once got the upper hand and contrived to disgust the nation for the remainder of time.

'Your presumption is intolerable, man,' said Vincent angrily; 'probably it is the beginning of the end —the end of your career as preacher. If you set yourself in opposition to Mr. Bryant, I shall look

out means of stopping your mouth. You may expect that.'

'You have no power over me, sir,' said Alick, planting himself defiantly before the gentleman.

It is easy to suppress a man guilty of robbery and sacrilege, whatever his pretext,' said Vincent, stepping back, as if offended by Alick's proximity.

'The sacrilege was in him who put the popish idols in God's house. I will pay you the worldly value of the table-cloth and the candles, so it ain't robbery.'

'Thank you. Your tone is insolent, Alick.' They eyed each other for a moment.

'Nannie, let me say a word to you,' said Vincent. The authoritative tone roused Alick still more.

'What have you got to say to my Nannie?' he said, throwing himself between them. Vincent turned round and stared at him. His Nannie indeed!

'Hands off, my good fellow, if you please. Come here, Nannie.' The girl, who had turned very pale, obeyed.

Alick had a choking sensation as if he were going to be possessed by a devil again, as when Mrs. Bryant had maddened him. But he fought it off, or at least its outward gesture. Vincent, however, saw the lightning of sudden fury in his eye, and the fit of trembling which shook his meagre

figure. He kept his eye on the fanatic as he said, clearly and rather loud, for he wished Alick to hear, 'You must give him to understand, Nannie, that this kind of thing is altogether improper, and I will not have it repeated. Mr. Bryant is not to be insulted and the religion he and Alick both profess rendered ridiculous.'

Alick turned suddenly and walked away along the rocks towards Tanswick, and Nannie watched him with a distressed and frightened look. But that little impatience Vincent had exhibited a few minutes ago had agitated her.

'Are you angry with me?' whispered Nannie, looking up at her lover on the tall horse; and if they had been alone forgiveness would soon have invaded his suspicion. But he only said,

'I am angry with Alick; you best know, Nannie, whether I have cause to be angry with you or not.' And he rode away, without another glance at her, for several eyes were on them, including those of Nannie's brother, and Vincent was afraid for her sake to provoke criticism.

'I knew how it would be,' he muttered to himself, lashing his horse; 'women like that kind of psalm-singing humbug. I must put a stop to this, or we shall be getting into trouble.'

CHAPTER V

NANNIE left Joe abruptly and made her way home alone. There were tears in her eyes, for she felt her dear lover was displeased. Yet on this occasion her sympathies were with her cousin, for the fanaticism which seemed so ridiculous to the gentleman was perfectly comprehensible to her, and she knew how little vanity, how much moral courage, there was in Alick's deluded soul. Alas! Vincent was justified in believing that Alick's prayings and sermonisings were influencing the girl. There was a persuasiveness about the man in these exercises which every one felt, and which was sometimes irresistible to the sensitive young creature too ignorant to discern the point at which he erred. How was she to make people understand that Alick was of importance to her not as a lover but as a spiritual director? For neither Nannie nor Alick understood, as indeed few priests and good women of any persuasion do, that 'in the mixing up of things lies the great Bad'; whereas the ordinary man feels it instinctively, and even when there is no suggestion whatever of love-making, cannot forgive his women for running after Jesuits and evangelists, zealous curates, and sweet preachers. Nannie went sadly home, fearing that

her lovers were likely to quarrel. In a combat Vincent would inevitably be victorious. Will you believe that Nannie could not imagine that event with satisfaction? She did not want manifestation of his strength against Alick. Alick was dear to her faithful heart from early association; and when she thought, as she often did, of his 'beautiful soul,' and believed him nearer heaven than the man she loved, Nannie felt that a contest in which her cousin should be crushed would not exactly endear to her the victor.

Meanwhile Alick in his flight was suffering more acutely than Nannie. A few days ago he had been smitten down with one of his bad headaches, and since then he had not only felt ill, but his serenity and loftiness of mien had given way a little. He had become feverish in his manner, fussy in his work, less authoritative in his tone. Moreover, the Christian graces of charity, forbearance, and gentleness, which he had so successfully cultivated, became all at once most extraordinarily difficult. Alick felt sinful and unhappy; then he took to self-ordained penances of the old monkish sort,—eccentricities which, described to Vincent on his return by old John Price, the prophet's devout admirer, had filled the worldly young gentleman with amazed and suspicious repulsion. In spite of the penances Alick felt sinful still. And now on this

Sunday afternoon, after preaching very fervently but with much weariness of body; after talking excitedly with Sir Vincent about the lying parson and then losing his temper upon hearing his rival address a single and quite harmless sentence to Nannie, Alick again arrived at the painful conclusion, which once before had for an hour nearly broken his heart,—that he was possessed by a devil. Good God! what a position! A prophet like Isaiah and Ezekiel, but possessed by a devil! possessed by a devil, like the man who wandered among the tombs, cutting himself and allowing no one to tame him! 'Heaven have mercy upon my soul!' groaned the unhappy prophet.

It was Sunday, and Alick had no work; his trade had been laid aside, and he had long grown too pious to waste time over pictures. Yet pictures haunted him still—pictures which were not steady to his eyes, but were evermore changing like dissolving views and running into each other like things in dreams. This afternoon he was bothered by that picture of the child Nannie on the bare-backed colt in the field at Faverton. But every now and then the colt stopped short, and the girl fell—surely he heard her shriek?—into the little pond which reflected the golden sky. There was a splash and the ripple went round and round like a whirlpool; and then a white figure rose to the water's surface and floated there, the colt stretching

out his neck and looking at the strange thing with innocent awe. 'It would make two pictures,' thought Alick, and began tracing the outline with his finger on the sand. But he found, to his horror, that he was drawing something altogether different; and he remembered presently that it was impious work, not to be thought of on the Sabbath. 'Prayer and fasting!' he groaned in remorse for the evil impulse, and hid himself in a nook of the deserted shore, his Bible in his hand, but his thoughts still wandering and sad. Once he looked up and fancied he saw Sir Vincent there, half undressed, as if he had been bathing, his dog leaping at his hand. But it passed from his eyes and he did not think of it again. That white figure floating on the pond at Faverton would not pass. Was Alick dreaming or awake? He could not tell. A horrible sensation came over him that he had murdered the girl and thrown her into the water; and now somehow the pond had changed into the Everwell sea, and he felt with sickening horror that he had flung the child over the precipice near Dr. Verrill's house and had drowned her there. After a moment Alick recognised that he had done nothing of the kind, and that it was all a passing fancy. What were these hateful fancies that came to him nowadays? Surely he was possessed by a devil! He did not feel well this afternoon; perhaps he was getting one of his familiar

and salutary brain fevers. He would go and see Dr. Verrill, who knew his constitution and would prescribe some simple diet to set him to rights. Alick set forth slowly up the cliff by the narrow precipice path to the doctor's cottage. As he was entering the garden, with its strange odour of unwonted herbs, the bells began to ring from the church, and the familiar sound seemed to exorcise the demon that had tormented Alick. He paused, leaning on the little gate. What on earth was he going to the doctor for?

Just then the little philosopher and his sister emerged from the house, dressed for evening church. Dr. Verrill looked very funny all in black, with a tall hat, his long red hair brushed perfectly smooth and his week's beard shaved. Miss Verrill looked funnier still in a very small felt hat and a white tulle veil, a coat like her brother's, and a silk skirt, held up with both hands and still frequently tripped over. 'Why, Alick, my man,' said the doctor, 'you are a stranger to us. Have you been at the Farm?'

Alick made a cheerful and perfectly untrue statement about himself and Nannie, his one idea being to prevent the doctor from suspecting that ecstasy of his on the seashore, and that he had half fancied himself taking an illness; he did not notice or did not care that he was lying.

'I cannot see what all you young men and young

women want to be marrying for,' grumbled Dr. Verrill; 'the mind never grows after marriage.' And his sister added—

'I am glad you and Nannie will be united, Alick. Though in my judgment a woman is superior single, I consider a man without a definite female to look after him such a poor creature, that I could not desire the fate for any favourite of mine.'

Alick smiled his thanks for these congratulations on his reputed engagement to pretty Nannie; but the doctor suddenly felt his pulse, and thrust a clinical thermometer under his tongue with a frown, and a recommendation of a brown bread steak and a pease pudding.

'I am very thankful to God, sir,' said the involuntary patient, mildly, 'that I get my health so much better than I did.'

CHAPTER VI

Mr. Bryant, being rather afraid of Alick, had thought it best to take small notice of the fanatic's onslaught upon his altar-cloth, candles, and flower vases.

'Ah, poor foolish fellow!' said the clergyman, 'one respects his courage! And we have got a new

altar-cloth from Helbronner's. Georgie and I have just put it up. I didn't irritate him by producing it this morning without explanation, but he doesn't attend the evening service.'

'You don't take Alick seriously enough,' said Vincent, still sombre in his mood. And a little later, having seen the prophet after all join the evening congregation, he went to church himself, anxious, like every one else, to see what Alick was 'going to do.'

The vicar was in the act of pronouncing the final blessing after his sermon that evening when Alick Randle, very pale and very resolute, rose quite suddenly in his pew; and said in that clear, forcible voice of his, which was not loud, yet which always commanded attention, 'The Lord has sent a message to this people to-night by me!' Nannie uttered a little cry and half rose too, looking appealingly at Sir Vincent, and Mr. Bryant lost his head and did not proceed with his valediction for a distinct interval. No one heeded him; all eyes were fixed upon Alick. Sir Vincent now left his pew, and with firm step, purposely rather noisy, he walked down the aisle to the prophet.

'Brawling in church is illegal,' he said distinctly. All the people were standing up now, peeping over the tall pew-sides at the two men. Vincent stood with his arms folded and his eye fixed on the

fanatic. For a moment it seemed as if Alick were going to dispute his authority, then he suddenly quailed, almost collapsed, swaying as he stood and clutching Nannie's arm for support. Mr. Bryant had come to by this time and accomplished his benediction; then the organ played rather hysterically and the congregation moved, Vincent waving them out with an impatient gesture. The building was quickly emptied, except for the shuddering Alick Randle and Sir Vincent, who was guarding him; Nannie, who was holding her cousin's limp and frozen hand; and Dr. Verrill, who was measuring out his shock mixture. 'Not that tomfoolery now,' said Vincent, with more force than politeness.

'Come now, Alick, we will go home,' said the gentleman, touching his prisoner's arm, a sense of pity having sprung up in his heart for the misguided sufferer. Alick obediently staggered to his feet and stepped forward, leaning on Vincent and still holding Nannie's hand. 'Oh, he is ill!' murmured the girl.

But the whole congregation was waiting patiently outside. Vincent felt annoyed; especially when Alick, perceiving the crowd, hesitated, then raised his head and looked round with a scared and bewildered air, as if he were trying to recollect what was going on.

'Nannie,' whispered Vincent, 'go to your father

there, and bid him from me to disperse these people. Come, Alick.'

But the prophet had checked his feet; vigour was returning to his frame and fire to his eye. Before Nannie could move he had surveyed the throng, and had raised his hand commandingly. A thrill of expectation ran through the spectators.

Mr. Bryant appeared now from the vestry, with his benignity and superficial remedies. 'You have something to say, my good Alick? Allow him to speak, Sir Vincent, if he wishes it. We are out of church now.'

'Alick,' said Vincent, 'take my advice and come away.' Alick looked at him for a moment with a pitiful hesitation, and Vincent felt somehow increasingly sorry for him. But then the prophet dropped the friendly arm, drew himself up, and with a calm and an assurance doubly impressive after his previous agitated weakness, he remounted the church steps, and standing there above the audience he spoke quite fluently and with resistless command in his tones—

'I CHARGE YOU ALL, IN THE NAME OF THE LORD, THAT YE LISTEN UNTO THE WORD WHICH HE HAS SENT YOU BY ME. It is a bidding from the Lord that we put away an evil thing and an evil man from among us, lest He bring judgment upon us in anger and in fury and in furious rebukes. The Lord has spoken it.'

Mr. Bryant stood in an easy attitude with a smile on his pleasant face; but as a matter of fact he was sick with a horrible dread. There were only about forty persons present, and these for the most part friendly to himself, and the speaker was a mere ignorant and presumptuous fanatic. That was one aspect of the situation, and the smile was assumed in conformity to it. But still the fanatic had that thrilling voice, and had he been as truly inspired as he believed himself to be, he could not have looked his part better. Mr. Bryant, having an uneasy conscience, could no more resist the impression of the speaker's authority than could little Miss Verrill, who was sobbing like a child, or stout Farmer Randle, who had not heard his nephew preach before, and was now watching him so attentively that he never saw Nannie convulsively clutch at Sir Vincent Leicester's hand,—surely an unseemly action on the part of a modest country maiden.

'For many days,' said the prophet, 'the hand of the Lord has been heavy upon me. He has given me neither sleep, nor rest, nor meat. At His command I have left my bed nightly, and have watched the rising and the setting of the stars, signs to us of the power and the bidding of God. And I have seen a star leave his place in the heavens and fall into destruction in the sea; even as Lucifer, son of the morning, was cast from his place; as we shall

all be cast forth who resist the authority and the might of our Maker. And I have heard the voice of the Lord upon many waters, and have seen the waves arise and roar and bend and break under His wrath; when the foam is caught up against the blackness of the night clouds, and the deeps are stirred by evil angels doing the will of the God they hate. And I saw then the great power of the Lord, and knew that if He willed it so, His storm could crumble this cliff upon which we stand and sweep the church which yon wicked man has profaned into His destroying waves, until the day when there shall be no more sea. And this the Lord *will do*, EVEN HERE IN EVERWELL, UNLESS YE REPENT.' And so on, followed by biblical thunders against the lying and the foolish prophet, who said 'the Lord saith' when the Lord had not spoken.

Vincent turned to Mr. Bryant. 'Hadn't you better make some sort of reply?' he said; 'these stupid folk don't understand that the man is simply insane.'

But Mr. Bryant also was cowering and speechless. Vincent shrugged his shoulders; then tapped the now kneeling Alick on the shoulder.

'My dear fellow,' he said, 'you are very eloquent, but eloquence is confusing to plain people. Will you state in simple words what has offended you?'

'It's the altar-cloth,' interposed the clergyman, hastily; 'our poor friend thinks it popish.'

'Is that so, Alick?' But the prophet's frenzy had passed; he looked up with an expression so far from formidable that again pity for him complicated Vincent's action.

'We will take it away for the present,' continued the clergyman, 'and next Sunday I will preach on the subject and explain.'

'Let us have the sermon by all means,' said Vincent, 'but I think, sir, you will be mistaken if you make any change in your arrangements under pressure of this kind.' Then raising his voice and addressing the agitated throng, he continued: 'The time has come, my friends, when I must give you my opinion of this movement there has been among you. While Alick Randle's object was to promote order and decency among us, and his denunciations were against crime and vice, nobody wished to hinder him, and it seemed ungracious to expose his fallacies. But now that he is making war upon mere church furniture, it is evident that he has wandered away from essential religion and spiritual importance. When he delivers a "message" about such trifles I am altogether a disbeliever in its divine authority. As to the imagined supernatural evidences of Alick's commission, Mr. Bryant, Dr. Verrill, I myself, any one who has studied such

manifestations by the light of reason and experience, knows that they are to be accounted for by natural laws, which have no more special meaning nor moral reference than has the falling of a meteor which may be seen any autumn evening, or the rising of a storm at sea. Alick Randle is a friend of mine, for whom I entertain a great respect; I should be sorry to call him an impostor, but I do say, most distinctly, that he is deluded. I do *not* believe him an extraordinary messenger from heaven; and when he proposes what I consider folly, I shall oppose him; when he transgresses against our ordinary rules for the wellbeing of society, I shall treat him with no more leniency than is the right of any other person.'

These utterances had some effect in restoring composure to the audience, chiefly perhaps through Alick himself, who had risen and was apparently restored to the demeanour of an ordinary mortal. The throng soon dispersed, Alick walking away alone with a firm step. At a little distance he was joined by Nannie.

CHAPTER VII

'DEAR me, Mrs. Bryant!' exclaimed Georgina, 'have you seen a ghost, or what is the matter with you?'

Neither of the ladies had been that evening at church. The vicar's wife, too restless and troubled to take pleasure at present in her husband's preaching, had been out for a short stroll by herself. But no sooner had she crossed the threshold on her return than she sank fainting on her stepdaughter's arm. Georgina rang for the under-housemaid, who was the only servant at home. Susan was one who dearly loved a tragedy.

'Miss,' she said, clasping her hands as she had seen Alick, the preacher, do, 'the missus is going to die of the typhus. My grandmother's illness begun just so.'

'Then don't touch her,' said Georgina, 'and don't scream in that senseless way. Go and fetch the doctor.'

'Alick Randle, the holy man, is passing, miss. I will call him in. His prayers made my grandmother go off easy.' Georgina was not listening; she was hoping Emma might die, and trying to recall all her knowledge about infection. So Susan acted on her own responsibility, and ushered in Alick and Nannie without a moment's hesitation. Naturally Georgina was displeased.

'How dare you intrude like this?' she said angrily to Alick, who retired with his usual proud humility. Georgina, however, detained Nannie; 'You can stay,' she said, condescendingly; 'you may be of assistance to me.'

'Nannie, Nannie, my darling,' murmured Mrs. Bryant, stretching out her arm to the girl, who knelt and received her affectionate kiss.

'How silly you are!' said Georgina; 'you'll get it yourself.' Nannie had not come to close quarters with Miss Bryant before. The imposing young lady failed to awe the country maid so much as might have been expected.

'I never heard faintness was catching, miss,' she said with a little smile; 'I think my aunt seems tired and weak. I will mind her if you will make a cup of tea. That will cheer her up as well as anything.'

'*I* make tea!' repeated Georgina, in great dudgeon. 'Susan can do it when she comes in from fetching the doctor.'

'Oh, but there is no need for that!' cried Nannie; 'Dr. Verrill will bid you get mushrooms or something *much* more difficult than a cup of tea!'

'Don't leave me, Mary!' murmured Emma; and Georgina said she was wandering, then threw herself upon a chair, opening a novel.

Mr. Bryant came in, and with him Sir Vincent. They were discussing Alick, and the clergyman was trying to remove the young man's evident impression that the fanatic had frightened him.

'What on earth is going on?' faltered Mr. Bryant, with another attack of complete terror, as he saw the dreaded girl at his wife s side, looking

her prettiest too, as she knelt in the dying light, one arm under Mrs. Bryant's head. To the clergyman the likeness between the mother and daughter was alarmingly evident at that moment. Nannie raised her eyes to her lover's and a smile involuntarily dimpled her lips. There was archness in her glance, reaction after the agitation Alick had caused her; and somehow she felt queen of the present situation. Georgina explained matters hastily.

'I believe Miss Randle fancied herself useful, papa, but I have no idea how she got in. I fancy she was visiting her friend Susan in the scullery.'

'We are much obliged to Miss Randle,' said the clergyman, 'but we need not detain her.' Nannie rose most demurely, but for the life of her could not restrain another peep at Vincent, and then a flush at finding his eyes absently fixed upon herself.

'Impudence!' murmured Georgina, and moved her skirts away from the touch of Nannie's Sunday frock. Vincent was indignant, and as Nannie went out, he took his leave also. And Mr. Bryant and Georgina glared at him through the window so intently, that it was not until Emma uttered a piercing yell that any one knew Dr. Verrill had surreptitiously glided in and had poured the biting shock mixture down the neck of the patient.

'Nannie, you little minx,' said Vincent, catching

her up when they were out of the range of eyes, 'you have done for us now. I shall have to explain to Mr. Bryant.'

'It was *you!*' cried Nannie; 'why *did* you stare so, and come out after me? I am very sorry,' she went on, half laughing, half apologetic, 'but Miss Bryant had made me so cross, I just had to do something to her. She was too grand to make a cup of tea! and I saw her ladyship boil a kettle in that very house the day my aunt came first! I did!' Vincent laughed. 'Do you know she told stories!' cried Nannie. 'She *had* sent for me, and she made me stay, and she didn't help Mrs. Bryant one bit. She only stood there crying out that aunt had the fever and she wouldn't touch her.'

'Nannie,' said Vincent, 'it is not pretty of you to abuse Miss Bryant to me.'

'Why not? You don't care about her, do you?'

'Not a rap now,' said Vincent, impelled to confession. The girl started and looked up anxiously.

'*Now?*' repeated Nannie.

'Not a rap. I thought I cared for her once. It was a delusion. You have a right to know it, though, my sweet.' Nannie's merriment seemed exhausted, and she stepped on with her eyes on the ground.

'I did not know you had ever loved any one but me,' she whispered, after a while, not looking up.

'I love you best and you only, Nannie. But I wish I had known you long ago; then I should have been saved many mistakes as to what love really is.'

Vincent's hand was on her shoulder as usual, and Nannie turned her head and kissed it gravely, her cheeks flushing. 'Nannie, you are a darling to understand me!' murmured Vincent. But even lovers are not always perfectly comprehensible to each other. Nannie understood, as Georgina never could have done, that her lover was remorseful for some former and ignorant faithlessness against herself; but her thoughts had not got beyond Miss Bryant, and Vincent had already forgotten that very superficial love affair. A few minutes afterwards they had a more serious misunderstanding.

'I was so afraid you were vexed with me this afternoon,' said Nannie, timidly, after a while.

He thought a little.

'I was a little cross, wasn't I? We seem to have made it up now! But I was vexed, Nannie, yes. I did not know you were going about in that conspicuous way with Alick; and—I don't like it.' He put his arm round her: 'Don't you see, my treasure, it leads to misconstructions? You are making difficulties for yourself. And you remember what I said——'

'It is not so very easy to help it,' said Nannie; 'he wants me so. Ah, don't be vexed with me!' Vincent thought he had reproved enough.

'The fact is, Nannie,' he said presently, 'I am not comfortable about Alick. I hope all this preaching is not turning his brain.' Nannie sighed.

'He is queer. I never know how much he means when he talks of things he has seen and all that. He frightens me when he tells of voices and visions. But then I remember it is only a way of talking, like the Bible and the *Pilgrim's Progress*. Bunyan didn't really dream all that, did he?'

'I suppose not. It isn't Alick's visions which alarm me, but his boundless conceit.'

'Ah no! That is where you do not understand him!' cried Nannie, warmly; 'don't you see, sir, Alick thinks he has to believe and to obey every single word in the Bible, because it is all spoken by God! Mr. Bryant and other people say that too, but they don't do it. I never saw any one else who obeyed the Bible like that! Would *you* cut your hand off if it made you do wrong? Alick would! I know he would.' Vincent did not like this praise of his rival.

'If I cut my hand off, Nannie, it would not be a proof of my sanity.'

'Would you burn it off to pull some one out of the fire?'

'To pull *you* out,' said Vincent.

'It is the same. Only Alick thinks there are other things as important as pulling people out of fires.'

'Nevertheless, Nannie, I am going to get an opinion as to how far Alick's reason and self-command may be trusted. He nearly poisoned himself once; I won't have him cutting his hands off, as you suggest; or perhaps some one else's.' The girl was startled.

'Whose opinion?' she asked.

'A doctor's. The opinion of a better doctor than Verrill.'

'What would he do to Alick?'

'Probably advise that he should give up preaching; perhaps leave Everwell.'

'Alick would be very angry,' exclaimed Nannie.

'Very likely. You must not tell him at present.'

'Please, I hope very much—please, sir, for my sake,' protested Nannie, 'don't do it.'

'I am sorry to demur to any request of yours, Nannie,' said Vincent, eyeing her suspiciously.

'You do not know what Alick would think. If you wanted to make him really crazy, it would be the way!'

'Which shows we must be on our guard.'

'You think Alick is crazy just because you don't understand him!'

'I have not said that Alick is crazy. But twice to-day, and on former occasions, he has looked so to me,' said Vincent, bluntly. Nannie was angry.

'If you send Alick away from Everwell,' she cried, 'I will just go with him!'

Vincent stopped short. 'What do you mean by that, Nannie?' he asked, slowly. They stood facing each other, Nannie's blue eyes flashing, and Vincent very quiet and cold, but devoured by sudden jealousy. Her excitement had disagreeably astonished him.

'Do you think,' cried the girl, passionately, 'that any woman would turn from a person at the moment he was sick and lonely and perhaps despised, and needing her most? Are you going against Alick and trying to make me afraid of him with such a notion as that? I will not desert him!'

'Take care what you are saying, Nannie,' said Vincent.

Nannie, frightened by his tone, was half-crying. She laid her hand on his, but for the first time it met with no answering gesture.

'I didn't mean I'd go with Alick as anything but his sister,' she pleaded.

'That is the height of folly, Nannie. You are not Alick's sister, and you know he does not regard you as such, nor does any one else.'

'But I can't give him up altogether!' exclaimed

Nannie. 'I am *very* fond of him!' There was a long silence.

'How much do you mean of what you have been saying, Nannie?' said Vincent at last. 'Because,' he continued, as she made no reply, 'I must speak plainly in my turn. In a sense you are free; you have never promised to be certainly mine, and I have no claim to assert, if even now you dismiss me. But that does not justify any trifling between us. Do you not understand that love is exclusive? So long as you belong to me, even vaguely, I do not choose you to have intimate relation with any one else; particularly with such a wild, headstrong madman as Alick.'

Vincent in love with a princess would have spoken in precisely the same way, but from strong emotion his tone was imperious and the farmer's daughter was offended.

'I have no intimate relation with Alick, sir,' she said, proudly, 'but I will not listen to you calling him names.'

She moved on towards her home, and when he made a step to accompany her, shook her head. Vincent dropped back and watched her retreating figure with disappointed gaze. A little farther on the path made an abrupt turn, and once out of his sight Nannie sat down and burst into tears. She did not cry long, however. She sat up straight,

her eyes raised to the soft evening clouds, and her fingers on the concealed ring he had given her.

After a while her lover rejoined her. 'Have we quarrelled, Nannie?' he asked, sorrowfully.

'If we have, sir,' said Nannie, with trembling lips, 'I do not think it is my doing.' Vincent took her hand in his.

'Nannie,' he said, 'I cannot take back what I have said; but believe me, my darling, it is not that I do not love you with all my heart; nor that I am not feeling most keenly that I have, perhaps selfishly, led you into an ambiguous position, which will require the greatest care from us both, if it is not to end in difficulty.' Nannie was touched, for his voice shook.

'You have not done me any harm,' she said, gently. 'Please don't be regretting anything for me. But I want to think it all over by myself. I don't think I understood before that you required——'

'Nannie!' exclaimed Vincent, with a terrible pang, for her tone seemed to imply that his conditions were too hard for her, 'you are not going to give me up after all our love?'

'I must think it all over by myself,' she repeated, quietly. Then she rose and clasped her hands on his arm. 'You must never believe for a

moment,' she said, 'that I intended to trifle with anybody about such a sacred thing as love!'

'Nannie, Nannie, my own darling! forgive me!'

She raised her face gravely to his, and he kissed her lips again and again. Then they parted without further speech.

CHAPTER VIII

MEANWHILE the vicarage had subsided into its customary calm. Dr. Verrill, after offending everybody, had gone away; Georgina had retired, and Mr. Bryant and his wife were alone. Emma still looked pale, and was conscious that Edward was less kind than usual. It was not a propitious moment for the news the poor wife had to give.

'I wish to goodness you'd go on, my dear,' said the irritated man, impatient of her stammering.

'I can't, Ned, while you are so cross.'

'You are enough sometimes to try the patience of Job, Emma! It wouldn't be wonderful if I were annoyed, considering the provocation I have had to-day. There has been one eternal worry ever since we came to this infernal place, and I declare I believe you do all you can to make it worse. Well, *are* you going on?'

She felt herself turning faint again. Never before had she heard her husband speak in this manner. 'I'll let it be for to-night, Edward,' she said, mournfully. Life was becoming too difficult for her. And all of a sudden she remembered, poor fool—and the thought seemed for a moment to stop the beating of her heart—that she had dealt with a man once who, whatever his faults, had never spoken to her rudely; he had never raised his voice and he generally smiled; and if he was sarcastic she had never found it out. And she had learned, this very evening, that after all he had not deceived her intentionally, and that he had meant to right her, if she had not married again so hastily! It was an exceedingly lame story; but she believed it, for a day or two at any rate.

Mr. Bryant, who was bad-tempered only under exceptionally exasperating circumstances, was himself aware that nervous irritation was making him unkind, and to the most gentle, harmless woman in the world, as he very well knew. He had been wiser to go out and purge away his bad humour in private. While such disease is on one, attempts at kindness and heaping of coals on the enemy's head is quite beyond the strength.

'You had better tell me, Emma, my love. I am sure I always wish to help you. Come, what is it about?'

'It is about—Nannie's——' she stopped, trembling.

'Oh now, I really am too much worried to-night——' then he remembered that whatever it was, his wife had fainted about it. It might be of importance. 'What of the girl, Emma?'

'Oh, Ned, have pity on me; it is about—about Nannie's father!'

'Why can't you call him Ben? You know his name, I believe?'

'Edward—' the poor wife rose and staggered to her husband's side, kneeling beside him imploringly, 'I didn't mean Ben. Her own—Mary's real father.'

Mr. Bryant started to his feet, freeing himself from her touch.

'Are you mad?' he said, his voice shaking with anger. 'You have no sense of the commonest decency, Emma, to allude to that person to me. How dare you disobey me like this? By heavens, you will make me hate you.'

No answer but sobs from the terrified creature crouching by the empty chair.

'Get up, Emma, and don't make an idiot of yourself. Come now, I intend to be obeyed. That scoundrel has disappeared from your history and from the world, fortunately for you. If he were still in existence, by Heaven, you should not be here

—in my house—associated with my daughter—a drag upon my career. You had better take care how you recall him to a shadow of existence by your indelicate sentiment, and your worse than stupid chatter. Come now, you have told the man Alick Randle something?'

'Oh, Edward, no.'

'You have been gossiping with Ann Leach again, or with that girl?'

'No, indeed, I have not.'

'What have you done?'

'Nothing. I won't say no more, as you take it so. It's of no importance.'

'I am the best judge of importance. Whom did you see when you were out?'

'No one — at least — oh, Ned, be patient with me! I can't help being such a miserable woman!'

'Whom did you see?'

'I think it was the visitor at the Heights.'

'Well? You didn't speak to him, I hope, without having been introduced?' said Mr. Bryant, with quick suspicion of his wife's idea of etiquette.

'No—oh—no! Ned, I am going to faint again! I can't see. Give me some water.'

Mr. Bryant bustled out of the room for some brandy and refused to let his wife agitate herself further.

The next day a curious little note in a feigned hand was brought by a ragged child for 'the gentleman at the Heights.' It fell into Vincent's possession first.

'Unless you can do something to save *her*, do for God's sake go away. You do not know the mischief you will make for me.—E.'

Vincent could make nothing of it and threw it on the table.

'Some of your lunatic friend's work I should think,' sneered Mr. Kane, glancing at it.

The visitor stayed on a few days at the Heights, went away and returned more than once, to his nephew's weariness. The Bryants saw no more of him; but Mrs. Leach had made his acquaintance, and once Vincent caught him watching Nannie with great interest. He had, however, given up his jesting admiration for the girl, which was as well, for Vincent was less than ever in the mood to relish it.

CHAPTER IX

Alick did not preach on Monday, and his disciples stood about looking for him, and were inclined to

grumble. In the evening he ran up to the Farm for a visit to Nannie, returned sooner than usual, and with a new expression on his face,—an uneasy look, as if something had roused suspicion in his mind, and he had caught a glimpse of a snare.

'Is thy poor head bad, Alick?' asked Mrs. Leach, and he started and laughed, aimlessly it seemed to Ann. Then he turned on her—

'You've been at the Tanswick beer-house, mother. Are you not ashamed to pass the grave of your husband, that God-fearing man, in such a sin-struck condition? Some day, mother, when you go by, you'll see his spirit standing on the mound where we laid his mouldering body, and he will come to you through the darkness and strike you with his ice-cold hand, and ask you in his deathly voice, "What meanest thou, woman, to dishonour me thus?" I take it, mother, you wouldn't want to see your husband rise from the tomb to speak to you so.' Alick had dragged Mrs. Leach to the window pointing with his long finger, which looked white and horrible in the dusk, towards the distant churchyard, while his eye stared fixedly in the same direction, giving the impression that he saw not merely the far-away headstones and green wind-swept mounds, but the ghost he spoke of waiting on Jim Leach's grave.

'I don't want Jim Leach nor Jim Randle neither

to come from the place we put 'em,' whimpered Mrs. Leach; 'but, lad, I'm a sober woman now, and have heard thee preach and obeyed the spirit and signed the pledge.'

'Mother,' said Alick, 'thou art not rightly sober now.'

And though Mrs. Leach had not broken her pledge, he confused her; for she was the firmest of all the believers in his sanctity, and could not believe he was falling into her own trick of misstatement. So at his bidding she fell a-praying and confessing, joining to her supplication a fervent petition that if Heaven sent her messages about drink or anything else, it should not be by one of her husbands. 'Gin they came together it would be worst of all,' she said to herself. 'Gin I saw 'em coming in, in their grave-clothes, arm-in-arm, and both named Jim, and both so fond of me, and Jim Randle the youngest, and touching me with their nasty clammy hands, one on each side—it's spirits itself I'd be obliged to have, and to send Alick himself to fetch it, gin I wasn't to die of a heap before those ghosts had done speaking to me and had got back into their coffins again.'

The next day Alick was eating his dinner and preparing a sermon at the same time; the dinner consisted of about two mouthfuls of mashed carrots,

washed down by a tumbler of raspberry-leaf tea; and his thoughts were wandering from the sermon, for he never turned over a page of his Bible. But he was not among observers; the working of Alick's mind, as well as of his curiously unhungry stomach, had long been abandoned as a hopeless mystery by Jim Leach's commonplace offspring.

'Sally!' cried Alick, suddenly, his face pale and drops starting on his brow, 'who is yon strange man walking there in the street with Nannie and Sir Vincent?'

'I never sey him afore,' said Sally; 'bey yo afeard of him, Alick?' For her brother had left the window and retreated into the shadow of a corner as if fearful of being seen. Presently Alick slunk out, hatless and without a word. He pursued the trio at a distance, creeping along furtively as if hiding. If it were the fire of jealousy which had driven him forth, it gained little additional fuel, for Sir Vincent was not talking to Nannie. It was the white-haired stranger who was catechising her, about farm produce perhaps, for she carried a basket on her arm with a pair of ducks which she had been taking as a present to her aunt. Had any one passed Alick he might have wondered at the prophet's shuddering mien and the look of cunning in his eye; but the road was deserted, and his pursuit was accomplished unobserved.

'It's him,' muttered Alick to himself, and biting his fingers; 'it's the mad doctor.'

In the afternoon the tide had rolled far out in long lines of low breakers, leaving the flat rocks of the scar uncovered, with here and there between them level stretches of sand. Upon one of these the congregation assembled; and Sir Vincent and the stranger were there too, lounging apart; the stranger was interested by the hymn-singing, and by the lay preacher, into the state of whose mind he had come to inquire; for the doctor was a Plymouth Brother and had a turn for lay preaching himself. When he first heard Alick's rich voice, he smiled a little and was inclined to think he had lighted upon a village Whitfield, in whom the shallow worldling had discovered a case for his private madhouse.

'I have been thought mad myself by my worldly relations,' he reflected; 'however, the man has certainly a wild eye.'

Alick's sermon was thoroughly sensible that day, for he did not himself preach at all, but read from his favourite Isaiah. He had been unable to think of anything but the white-haired stranger who was present; and when he opened his lips to speak could not remember one syllable he had prepared, nor so much as the text of his discourse. His inspiration had failed; he was dumb. Alick cast about for a device, and then, as I say, read random passages from

Isaiah, that mighty Hebrew poet; piecing them together with impromptu skill, and delivering them with all the charm of his keen appreciation and familiarity, in his exquisite tones, like those of some rare musical instrument, which, under the touch of a master hand, wakes instant vibrations in the hearts of the hearers. There was a lump in Nannie's throat before he had finished; even Vincent was moved, and the stranger was struck dumb with admiration.

However, the tide had turned, and there was no use in the congregation's half-discontented requests for a sermon. Alick had none to preach, and there was no longer dry standing on the stretch of sand. The people dispersed, and the two gentlemen, Alick and Nannie, moved shorewards together. Alick (sick at heart) was calm and even smiling; more sensible and alert about worldly matters than he had seemed for days. He told of even Mr. Bryant's altar-cloth without a trace of absurdity, and it was impossible for Vincent not to feel provoked by his man's *mal-à-propos* exhibition of his best side. For Nannie, not having the least thought of betraying her lover's confidence, had yet given Alick a hint, unintentional,—not much of a hint at all, but enough for one in the prophet's morbid condition of intellect,—which, blinding him to some things obvious enough, gave him unnatural quickness of apprehension for others. He guessed all about the

doctor, was forearmed for the encounter, and knew that Sir Vincent wished to make out he was mad.

'Ay, I see what you are at!' he cried that evening, forgetting all the restraints of forbearance and mildness which a month ago he had recognised as duty; 'you haven't found it so easy to steal my Nannie as you supposed. You've found out as she's going to be true to me, have you? And you think you have a trump in your hand, and have told her I'm crazed and shall be put away. You sha'n't tell her so no more. I ain't so easy got rid of.' And then a fit of trembling seized him, and he looked round furtively at himself in the mirror, to see if the devil possessing him had perchance grown visible: to see if he looked ill; if it could be possible that his enemy's suspicion was suspicion of a truth.

'He's a mad doctor, I suppose,' muttered Alick, driving his nails into the flesh of his arm and setting his teeth. And he walked over to Vincent and shook his arm, his eyes glaring, and a wild laugh wrinkling his haggard lips. 'I suppose he's a mad doctor!' repeated Alick.

Dr. Simpson saw through Alick of course; not entirely, for the man had been all day upon his guard, but a great deal more than he thought it wise to admit, except in confidence to Dr. Verrill, who did not listen. The great man did not understand Dr. Verrill, but he made a very good shot at every one else con-

nected with the case; at the patient himself, who was likely enough to give trouble some day but was not unhinged yet, and whose pious work was delightful; at the impetuous Sir Vincent, who had exaggerated; at Alick's relations, ignorant, emotional, and likely, if alarmed, to irritate the patient; at the fair young girl, half afraid of her saintly cousin, half enamoured of him, whose love would be his salvation. 'There is no occasion for alarm,' he said, cheerfully, 'and Dr. Verrill will keep an eye upon him. Medical men have to be most cautious in these matters,' he observed, as he pocketed his fee; 'we must have much stronger evidence before we interfere with a man's vocation or pronounce him a dangerous member of society. I prescribe a generous diet. Suspicion from others, apprehension about himself, thwarting in his work, disappointment, are the fatal things for a man in his condition. I gather he has been crossed in love; there you have reasonable cause for excitement in an ill-balanced nature. Give him the woman he wants, and a hundred to one he gives no further trouble. For the present, Dr. Verrill will keep an eye upon him.' And he repeated with a smile, 'I prescribe a generous diet, matrimony, and a general indulgence of his inclinations. Medical men must be cautious in these matters.'

'It is a great relief, dear, is it not?' said the compassionate Lady Katharine to her son.

'Mother,' answered Vincent, gloomily, 'let us never be religious over-much, for I do honestly believe it distorts the judgment.'

'You will learn, my young friend,' observed Mr. Kane, 'not to judge of people exclusively professionally. You omitted to study your parson's social position and your doctor's religious one. Shall we suggest that you have made two blunders?'

No one could imagine why Lady Katharine, forgetting all about Alick and Dr. Simpson, the topic in hand, answered this speech by the warmest defence of Mr. Bryant conceivable, declaring that he was the very man, in all respects, whom her deceased husband would have selected for the position he occupied; and that she had a sincere attachment for him and for all his family; more especially for his most beautiful and delightful daughter, whom she positively *loved*. The fact was she had received a hint from Georgina herself about a very terrible danger to her dear boy; and Vincent's marriage to Miss Bryant (always desirable) had assumed for her now an aspect of absolute necessity, to be urged at every opportunity.

'*That* vulgar young woman!' Lady Katharine had exclaimed, thinking of Caroline Randle and unspeakably shocked; 'impossible!'

'Oh, dearest Lady Katharine,' cried the weeping Georgina, 'do not believe it of him. It was a mere

passing delusion. I know it. He loves *me* with his true, his real self. He has told me so: often. *I* will save him!'

CHAPTER X

Suspicion from others, apprehension about himself, thwarting, disappointment—the worst things for a man in his condition—became Alick's portion in the days that followed; and Nannie was his only confidant.

Alick had forgotten how to sleep; but the infirmity had been undiscovered and unconfessed, and at night he lay motionless on his pallet, staring at the dim starlit ceiling and afraid almost to draw his breath, lest he should wake the two boys who shared his room and so be detected a watcher. How despondent were Alick's thoughts during those long night hours! He lost control of the thickly crowding fancies and fears, memories and resolves, till the last seemed first and the first last; the most horrible, the most natural, and the least noticed of supreme importance.

That failure to produce his sermon, for instance. Like a skilful actor he had woven his forgetfulness so cunningly into the play that every one had believed it set down in his part. He had told the people

that his divine prompter had bidden him this day only to read from the Holy Book. It was not till night during those long sleepless hours that he recognised in the statement a lie, worthy of Mr. Bryant. He had not heard the guiding voice at all; he had cast about for a device of his own. Alick discerned the difference, for he had been inspired so often, so long! Inspiration knew no toil, no uncertainty. He had not been inspired to-day. And oh what a moment for his inspiration to fail, when men were beginning to think him mad!

'My God, my God!' murmured Alick, with a groan, 'why hast Thou forsaken me?'

In the morning he went to Nannie, told her of his trouble and craved her help. Nannie was not glad to see him, for she knew he was coming between her and her lover; but it was not in her power to be cross to any one, least of all to one wounded and sorry like Alick.

'What's the matter, dear lad?' she asked, quite kindly, taking his hand and leading him to the pleasant bench under the walnut-tree where they could be quiet together.

'Did he tell thee I was mad, Nannie?' asked Alick, hopelessly.

'I will not tell you what he said,' answered Nannie, distressed, 'but it was no such ugly words, Alick.'

'Nannie,' said Alick, 'yon man who was friends with me when he came to Everwell first, is my enemy now. It's a bitter thing to look back on one's life and see the hopes that have been crushed and the pains that have grown out of pleasure, and how those one trusted most have betrayed one—some of 'em with a kiss, lassie.'

'No, Alick,' said Nannie, 'I never kissed thee a lover's kiss. Why are you so sad, Alick?'

He told her—the only confidant he cared for—of his soul conflict and the trap into which Satan had led him yesterday in that matter of the sermon. Nannie listened, only half-understanding.

'I have sinned, Nannie. Worse than the minister himself. I wish I had not spoken against him now,' said the prophet.

'I am sure so do I, Alick!' replied Nannie. 'But there! you are sorry. Your next preaching will be best of all.'

'Maybe the Lord is tired of my preaching,' said Alick, 'and is going to lay me low. And yon man—thy lover, Nannie—does not believe the Lord was with me! nor no one won't believe it when they see the Lord is with me no more. I want Him with me at this time more than ever before.'

'Alick,' said Nannie, puzzled but compassionate, 'I cannot think God is more needful to us one time

than another, and it is not like you, and not like what you used to say, to want God with you for your own sake's sake. Instead of talking to me here and crying out against God, because you are sad and a bit sick maybe, it would be better to be working for Him in the village among the poor and the sinful, and showing them His ways.'

'Thou wilt come with me, Nannie?' said Alick, eagerly.

She hesitated. Sir Vincent did not like her to go about with Alick. Yet as she looked at her cousin's worn and anxious face his need seemed great; it was not the moment in which she could withdraw her comfort and her help. Sir Vincent's generous soul would be the first to acknowledge that, once she explained. Oh if she could only get hold of her dear lover for one five minutes' *tête-à-tête!* But she went with Alick.

CHAPTER XII

'I SUPPOSE he doesn't know I correspond with the *Medical Journal!*' said Dr. Verrill one day later, talking explosively to his sister, while Alick was arranging the next room for the weekly club meeting.

'Perhaps not, brother. I wish you had had your coat on when Sir Vincent brought him in.'

'I have no patience with those men who live in grooves and make no experiments. The bare idea of the Executive holding its head above the Legislature! Just the same with your religious folk. That man Bryant to give himself airs! Give me the innovating genius like our poor friend Alick, if you want to set me psalm-singing.' Alick, hearing his own name, began to listen; he wondered why even Dr. Verrill called him 'poor.'

'I tell you what it is!' roared the doctor, 'if that man of traditions had been physician here in Everwell in these fever times, he'd never have discovered anything. The whole opportunity would have been wasted. He'd have cured a few weaklings by making them weaker and even more prolific than they are already, the fools; but he'd have left the diet and the population and the bathing of the place just where they were. The world would never have heard of my new drug E——. He actually mentioned R——' (another drug well known to the reader) 'as of value. I'd like to dose him with R——, the antedeluvian!'

Alick's eye at this moment lighted on a dark little bottle labelled R—— on the shelf he was arranging. It had no business there at any rate. He put it in his pocket for the moment and acci-

dentally carried it away when his preparations for the club meeting were complete.

'Brother, you exaggerate. The man spoke of R—— only in connection with Barnabas Sawyer; to whom I alluded in the presence of the strange medical man, merely from my customary deficiency of subject matter for conversation.'

'Barnabas Sawyer is dying, I am happy to say. He has undermined his constitution with putrid fish and the insides of sheep. I wouldn't cure him if I could. A patient of that depraved nature is to a doctor what a scandalous wife is to a husband. There is only one way for the reputation of either: Othello's.'

'The medical man asserted by way of conversation—he experienced my difficulty in finding a topic—that he would try Barnabas Sawyer with R——'

'I would as soon give R—— to Barnabas Sawyer,' shouted the doctor, jumping up and down, chair and all, in a wild excitement, 'as I would feed on it myself for a dinner dish. Have you, or have you not, read my last contribution to the *Medical Journal?* If you have, tease me no more with such silly repetitions of abolished formulas.' Alick had presently finished his business and went away.

That day a message was brought to the prophet in the cool of the evening. 'Barnabas Sawyer has

seen an angel in a vision bidding him send, Alick, for thee, to lay thy hands on him and cure him. Thy prayers have never failed him on whom thou didst lay thy hand, man; for pity's sake come to him now.'

The people were catching up Alick's semi-Scriptural jargon; and when he, discerning something heathenish, but too ignorant to know what it was, had replied unwillingly, 'I went but to those unto whom it was the Lord's will to send me,' the messenger said again—

'The plague stayed at thy prayer, Alick. There has been smitten but a man here and a man there since. Thou hast been given power over devils and diseases; and thou wilt not disobey the heavenly vision?'

It was beyond Alick to detect the fallacy; he thought himself bound to believe and to obey. The messenger departed, telling all the people he met that the holy man was coming forth to work a miracle.

'Time for one,' said a surly voice; 'the prophet has took it easy this last fourteen days. He's too much took up with that lass of his. Propheting and sweethearting never was connected in Bible times.'

Meantime Alick stood long thoughtful, and troubled by the message. 'You must come with

me, Nan,' he said, and would listen to no denial.

'Don't you like going, lad?' returned the girl, impatiently; for why should he look discontented about work he had selected himself? Alick's trouble lay deeper.

'Am I God,' said the man, bitterly, 'to kill and to make alive, that they send to *me* to recover a man of his sickness?' Nannie was speechless with surprise. Presently Alick cried, 'Lass, *thou* wilt have to pray. Thou must not let Him go till He has heard. We must recover the man, or I shall go mad because the Lord's favour is withdrawn!' Nannie put her hand through his arm.

'Dear Alick, I never felt sure about it. I wish we had a plaster of figs like what Isaiah put upon the king! Oh, I wish there was some good doctor here, like Sir Vincent's friend, to give us a medicine for the poor sick man. He has a wife and such dear, pretty, little children! What will they do without him? And he was kind to them, if he wasn't a good man all round.' Alick was not listening; his brain had stopped at Nannie's innocent wish for a clever doctor to give a medicine. And his hand went up to the little bottle he had carried away accidentally from Dr. Verrill's book-shelf that morning, after chancing to learn it was the very drug which the strange

physician had suggested for Barnabas Sawyer. Was it a leading of Providence?

Alas for Alick! *He did not know.* He was no longer sure of his inspirations. He had lost his way, and was now only feeling after God if haply he might find Him.

He remembered the failure of his sermon, and how he had yielded to an earthly device and had sorrowed and repented. Not thus would he sin again! He would put his faith in God alone. 'Nannie, lass, take care you do not tempt me,' said Alick, sadly.

There was a crowd round Barnabas Sawyer's cottage, for a storm was coming on, and the boats had not put out to sea. The village was needing excitement, and hailed Alick's approach with a low-breathed plaudit as at the appearance upon the stage of a favourite actor. Within was heard the hard breathing of the sick man and the loud crying of women and children. The crowd opened to admit the pale-eyed prophet and the beautiful girl who was with him. Nannie at a moment like this, when her soul was rapt in keen sympathy with the suffering, had the radiant expression of an angel.

The pair passed in to the dark cottage, and the crowd streamed after them, awestruck; for the presence of the dying is solemn, and solemn too was the mien of the heaven-sent messenger of healing.

The eyes of the sick man brightened when they fell upon Alick, and when the prophet, firm enough to appearance, though sick at heart, laid his hand on the cold brow, and spoke in his clear, quiet voice of repentance and faith, and the life to come in the New Jerusalem. The people gathered round the bed, all hushed and silent; and Nannie stood opposite to Alick where he could see her, the youngest child in her arms playing with her little escaping locks, and the sick man's woman—she was not his wife by any ties, legal or religious—leaning on the girl's slender figure, and resting her head with checked sobbings on Nannie's shoulder.

'Let us pray,' said Alick; and they all sank on their knees, while he lifted his voice, as so often before, in strong supplication for the forgiveness of sin and the restoration of life. And the people said Amen, and the little children lisped it, and Amen came with a groan from the sufferer himself. And then Alick rose; and for a moment there was a breathless silence, while his pale face paled perceptibly and his eyes burned through the gathering gloom. 'In the name of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,' said Alick—and if his voice faltered no one in the excited company noticed it —'I bid thee to arise and be healed.'

Alick closed his eyes and turned away. He had spoken the words; he had done his part, as he had

often done before with strong faith and confidence and joy. He was not aware that he had in any wise failed to act as the chosen of the Lord, the mouthpiece of His will, the visible sign of His presence. But to-day it all felt like play-acting to Alick; and when he had spoken he turned away with a roaring of many waters in his ears, and a darkness other than the darkness of night falling around him.

Barnabas Sawyer, who had lain for hours gasping and scarcely conscious, heard the words of the prophet and received them with joy, and felt an influx of divine strength poured into him. He sat up and stretched his hand to the weeping woman, while the crowd cried aloud, 'Hallelujah!'

'Bar—Bar!' shrieked the woman, 'praise the Lord! He has healed thee! I am a miserable sinner, but He has healed and pardoned thee!'

There was a hush, and Nannie's heart swelled with a strange emotion. But the fictitious strength failed. A cry of horrible pain and terror broke from the dying man's distorted lips. A sudden sharp convulsion followed, terrible to see. And he fell back with a choking sob and a wild roll of his glazing eyes—dead.

CHAPTER XIII

WHAT followed none exactly knew. The event had been so sudden, so unexpected, that it was bewildering and horrifying. The bystanders started back in a movement of panic, and the bereaved woman flung herself shrieking upon the corpse. Then some one muttered the word *judgment*, and the panic spread. Samuel Dykes, the lean ascetic, who was Alick's most devoted follower, and who was as mischievous to him as exaggeration ever is to truth, caught up the word, and began to declaim in what he believed to be his master's manner.

'The great God has withdrawn His face because of sin. For your sins, oh ye backsliding people of Everwell, He hears not your prayer. He has spared you for the sake of His servant the prophet, but now He will spare you no more. He has carried His servant the prophet away in a whirlwind, and He has handed all of ye over to destruction; beginning with the sinner Barnabas, who is at this moment in the flames.'

The people fell on their knees, shouting forth ejaculatory prayers and groans, to the wild accompaniment of the howling wind, which shook the frail cottage and shrieked and rattled at the casement.

A sudden gust flung the door open, and the bravest looked round with dread to see what spirit visitant was entering; the women screamed and cowered, hiding their faces; that sudden rush of angry air, which struck like a knife and made all teeth to chatter, blew out the flickering candle; and in the uncertain light it seemed to many that the corpse moved its hand threateningly, and opened its eyes to roll them horribly from one to the other of the terrified crowd. 'God have mercy on us!' groaned the people, striking themselves and one another in wild confusion.

'He lived in sin!' shouted the fanatic, 'and now he has been given to the devil. Cast forth the graceless corpse, and the partner of his wickedness, and the brood of infant devilry which they have reared.'

A yell came from a girl near the door. It seemed that the whole party were taking leave of their senses. There was even a movement to turn against the half-unconscious widow.

But now Nannie, the young girl, rose, very pale and very resolute; the only person composed and self-possessed. 'Oh, hush!' she said, in trembling tones, clasping her hands on her breast and facing the spokesman; 'what you say is blasphemy. This man's death is *not* a judgment on Everwell; it is because his time has come. He is *not* given to

Satan and to flames; because he trusted in God and God is love. And this woman shall be honoured and helped by us all, because she is in great sorrow and her children are fatherless. Go away, all of you, and leave this house of mourning; and let her and me do what is right for the dead man, for it is a profane and wicked thing not to care for the dead reverently and kindly.'

Nannie's expostulation, still more, perhaps, her quietness and hallowed face, were not without their effect. Silence was restored and they all stared at her blindly, while the children clung to her gown and the widow kissed her hand. But to be superseded in this way was not pleasant to Samuel Dykes. He had always been jealous of Nannie, who was too much heeded by Alick and who pulled the prophet contrariwise to what pleased his extravagant follower.

'Woman,' he shouted now, 'you are setting yourself against the holy prophet — it may be because you would draw him to the sin of carnal delight. The prophet has left this house, seeing it is condemned by God. Are you so blind you cannot understand that? Why else, when the prophet came to heal, is the man not healed? Call Alick back and he will tell you so, if you believe not me.'

Nannie's attention had been distracted from

Alick, and she had hardly noticed his disappearance. Now she looked round with some uneasiness.

'No,' she said, impetuously, 'do not call him back. There is nothing he can do here. You are all mistaken about Alick. He came to pray for the man, but *not* to heal him. He did not think he could heal him. He told me so as we came. He is not a doctor, and he had no medicine for the poor man's body. He has no more power to give life to the dying than he has to judge the dead, as you seem to think, either to flames or to the New Jerusalem.'

Poor Nannie, vehement and unforeseeing, thought she was defending the truth merely and calming over-strained nerves. She was unprepared for the immediate result. There was a pause, as the people looked at her and angrily silenced the fanatic when he tried to reply in behalf of his absent master. And then a rude, coarse voice was heard—that of the man who had demanded a miracle; and he began with a long whistle and a laugh.

'You got the truth, good folk. That's the chap's sweetheart and she knows, though he never meant her to let on. Alick Randle never healed no one, bless you! He ain't the saint he give out, with a key of his own for Heaven's gifts. He come here for sport, and now the luck's gone against him, he

has cut and run. Will you come with me, my pretty lass, gin you've turned against the prophet?'

Had Nannie loved Alick she might have remembered his reputation; as it was she made no attempt to repel the insinuations, to explain his position, or to assert his sincerity. The man was rude to her and she just ordered him out. He went, and the crowd followed him.

Nannie thought no more of the rabble, and was quite unaware that she had herself pulled down the delicately-poised fabric of Alick's authority. There was so much to be done for the helpless woman and the six fatherless children! A ministering angel was Nannie in such a case. Some women are born with that power of helping. There is a magnetic touch in their fingers which soothes distracted nerves; a tone in their voice which asserts power to remove hindrances and endure anxieties; a charm in their whole being which irresistibly suggests 'a correspondence fixed with heaven.' I have seen the faculty highly developed in the ugliest of Eve's daughters, and certain I am that superlative female excellence, whether of mind or body, cannot exist without it. 'Tis of the very essence of womanliness, and can be altogether spared only in certain few, tieless, self-centred old maids; who, like the Eumenides of old, may exist for a purpose, but

who are abhorrent alike to human kind and to the Olympian gods. Nannie worked away with a will; but she was in a fidget about Alick. His flight from the scene of failure had surprised her, as well as his words on the way thither.

CHAPTER XIV

'LAW now, it's Nan!' cried Mrs. Leach, delightedly. 'My dear, Patty is mad with you for not going home. I'm thinking you had best stay here for the night. I'm an old woman now, my dear, and have seen life, what with my seven children and my two husbands and all, and one thing I have learnt, if nothing else. My dear, go where you are wanted —that's what I've learnt, and don't be always labouring for them as can help theirselves. If you see a dusty room and a broom leaning up against the wall handy, sweep, my dear, sweep; the broom can't sweep of itself. But as for what Patty says about scouring milk cans as you can see your face in already, and rubbing windows as you are like to put your head through already for transparency, I say it's waste of yourself, and contrairy to my experience in a long and toilsome life, in which I always did my dooty. Which means, Nan, that it's

not at the Farm where you are wanted, among grand gowns and conventionabling ways, such as coming in early from walking and the like; but with me, who am a poor sinful woman, none so over-truthful as I'd wish, and often in want of a drop of liquor; and with my poor boy, who, I do believe, would lose that poor head of his if he had the wife he loved, and do a sight more good in Everwell without so much ill convenience to himself. You don't know, Nannie, never having had husbands to describe such things to you, the awful hubbub it makes in a man's nature, when he's in love with a young woman suitable to his means and position, and handsome, my dear, like you, who yet won't say not so much as "OH MY BELOVED!" to him.'

Nannie burst out laughing, and kissed her aunt apologetically.

'Give him hope, my dear,' said the woman, hugging her till the girl could hardly breathe; '"Ann," said Jim Leach to me—he was mighty taken with Alick afore ever I wedded him—"what that boy wants is 'ope. It's meat and drink and clothing for him. Give him 'ope, and he'll be the greatest man in Everwell. Take it away from him, Ann, and it's a bad job." And he's in there, Nannie, with his head, poor dear. Go in, Nan, and give him a supper of Hope. Suppose he kissed you now, Nannie! You wouldn't summons him

for assault, would you?' said Mrs. Leach, winking playfully.

Nannie pushed open the door of the workshop and found Alick kneeling in the dark, his head upon his arm, and with an air of supreme despondency. Clearly she was wanted. Clearly something was wrong with the prophet.

She struck a light and bustled about, talking easily and lightly, till she had procured him some supper. 'Now, Alick, confess,' said the girl, sitting beside him, and as much surprised by his yearning acceptance of her cheerfulness as by his almost ravenous appetite upon sight of the steaming cup and the plate of cold meat which she placed before him; 'what did you have for dinner? One dry crust and mint sauce? I'd like to give Dr. Verrill my mind about the vegetable system!' Alick prolonged the meal unnecessarily; it was delightful to have Nannie of her own free will sitting alone with him, and waiting on him as if she were his wife.

Mrs. Leach, looking in, was enchanted to see them so familiar together.

'Bless you, my son and daughter-in-law,' she murmured, retiring discreetly.

But after a while Nannie's forced cheerfulness failed. She could not forget the dismal house she had left and the dismal scene she had witnessed;

and she began to marvel that her cousin could put it aside so easily.

'Alick,' asked Nannie, suddenly, 'why *did* you run away like that when that poor man died?' The unhappy prophet was himself again instantly,—his confused, fearful, grieving self; and Nannie was sorry she had introduced the topic, for the gloom, which she had too successfully banished, overwhelmed him again as he looked up at her with woe-struck eyes, of which the haunting sadness lingered in her memory long afterwards.

When, unable to restrain her curiosity, about an hour later Mrs. Leach peeped in again, Nannie was standing beside the seated Alick, holding his hand; while his head leaned against her, and he gazed into her calm eyes, and drank in the soothing tones of her gentle voice. But what she was by this time saying was very surprising to the mother, who had hoped to witness mere love-making.

'Alick,' said Nannie, gravely and comfortingly, 'I cannot think God meant you to do it, and all for a chance word from a stranger. Listen, dear lad. God did not send you to the man to do that. You were sent to do just what you did—to pray for his dying soul.'

'When I hearken to you, Nannie,' responded Alick, feverishly, 'it seems like I could think so

too. I don't know how it will be to-morrow, lass—I don't know how it will be to-morrow!'

Mrs. Leach was hopelessly puzzled, for she had caught the ring of anguish in his tone.

CHAPTER XV

For the last twenty-four hours a storm had been raging at Everwell, and now in the intervals between the wind-gusts came downpours of drenching rain. The season had been unusually dry, and in dry weather the clay, alternating on this coast with the sandstone, is liable to cracks and fissures, which turn to landslips when the winter torrents begin. In the village heavy rain always causes a commotion, for an overflow of the beck is irritating no less than unwholesome; and the beck's overflow is almost certain when the storm is coincident with a high spring tide, as it was on this particular Sunday. 'Maybe the prophet has prayed against the flood,' said one, and his hearers laughed.

'Then we're like to be drownded to-night,' returned another; and they all laughed again. The people had been shocked by Sawyer's death yesterday, and they wanted a laughing-block. They found it in their prophet.

He passed along the street and the people stared

and said nothing; a few nudged each other. No one followed; no one spoke to him. This was a new sort of reception. Alick stopped and raised his hand to his brow as if bewildered, for a man grows accustomed to homage, and he feels a blank when it is withdrawn. And Alick had never had the firm self-confidence of genius; far more than he knew, his belief in himself rose out of the belief of the people. He was startled by a slap from behind, and a mocking voice quoting Scripture like a very learned clerk, 'Prophesy; who is it that smote thee?' And again the people laughed. And then, 'Where's your sweetheart, Alick? She's turned against you. She spake up behind your back, she did. She told us the miracles was tricks, my boy.'

To be jeered like this? He who had moved the people whither he would? who had been admired—feared—by that smooth-faced parson even! The recollection of Mr. Bryant reminded Alick of something. It was with the old feeling of inspiration that he said, his eye flashing—

'The Lord would have you this day in His holy temple. The Lord hath a controversy with you. And He will show His power, to those who fear His name and to those who fear it not.' And then he walked on, calm and majestic, the prophet again like Ezekiel or Isaiah.

But the feeling of inspiration passed, and the next moment Alick longed to run away and hide himself; for he had prophesied some sort of doom to descend to-day upon Mr. Bryant, the lying prophet, and now he had lost all sense of belief in his own prophecy. It seemed to him absolutely impossible that anything should happen. He seemed suddenly to have fallen out of the atmosphere in which miracles live. 'It is a trial of my faith,' said Alick; 'no; it is a punishment for my sin.' But he felt sure of nothing. The familiar voice behind him which had guided and instructed was quite silent. The light that was in him was darkness. Alick began to wonder, even he himself, if the light had ever really shone, if the voice had ever really spoken.

It was too early for church. Alick turned aside and wandered upon the cliff alone. In one place he discovered that a great mass of rock had fallen away and now lay foamed over by the breakers below, so that the hill-top overhung. Landslips at Everwell were noticed little except near the dwellings of men; only the jet seekers would care for this one in an unfrequented place. Alick lay on the wet grass crowning the cliff, and reflected upon many things.

Suppose he had been wandering about last night, as many a night before, upon those very rocks at

the time they had fallen, and had been drowned in the flood? How simple it seemed—how nearly to have happened—without any notice from God at all! For that too seemed possible to Alick to-day; that he might come to a bad end somehow, without God's interposing, or caring, or even knowing—he who had been His prophet and had believed his every hair numbered! A groan burst from the suffering lips. That the past should seem unreal to him! A sign—a sign he must have! Alick groaned and agonised for a sign! Alone, unseen, unheard, with prayer to his God, and great entreaty, he commanded the rocks to move once more; and they obeyed him not. The tide thundered and boiled, but the new face of the cliff was hard set and not a pebble shook, though the rocks had moved last night and had been cast into the sea—not at his word. Could it be that the heavenly machinery had run down too soon? Were such accidents possible? But now at last the church bells began to peal, and Alick rose and tried to accept simply and resignedly his new position of one no longer powerful with heaven; to slip into church despised and neglected; to kneel a despairing penitent at the feet of the very man he had denounced; he, Alick, who had ever spoken truth, but was to be rejected now because he could do no miracle.

'I wish every one were as punctual as you, Alick,'

said Mr. Bryant, in his pleasant way. And he passed into the vestry, wondering, with a discomfort born of his now habitual apprehension, what Alick Randle was doing there all by himself half an hour too soon. 'He is concocting some stupid interruption,' thought the clergyman.

But poor Alick was only resting and trying to get warm and endeavouring to pray. He could not fix his thoughts. The only thing his attention could get hold of was the reflection that the landslip might very easily have damaged the church; for it was a ruinous old building—often named unsafe. 'I will speak to Sir Vincent about it this very day,' thought Alick; 'something should be done to stave the cliff just there. It wants a wall —a breakwater. The church is in danger.' And he raised his eyes idly to the chancel arch above his head. Long ago in Sir Charles's time, when Alick had been a little boy not long resident at Everwell, there had been alarm about a crack in that arch; and it had been secured, rudely enough, for things were not done well at Everwell, by an iron bar crossing the archway; a terrible eyesore now to Mr. Bryant. Alick always remembered the putting up of that clumsy support, for the job had been completed on the very day of his mother's second wedding; and in the church itself, staring at the archway, and at the newly married couple,

he had said with his notorious precocity, 'Whom God has joined with a word only God can put asunder; but what man has joined with iron, God can put asunder by laughing at it.' And Jim Leach had smiled good-humouredly; but some one boxed the child's ears for saying bad omens at a wedding; and Alick, who never could stand much knocking about, turned sick with the blow and the wedding cake and the excitement, and so had his own unlucky speech fixed in his memory. He remembered it to-day; and querying whether he had not had faint shadowings of the prophetic gift even in his childhood, he raised his eyes idly to the arch.

Lo! the iron bar had yielded to the separating force of the cracked arch when the foundations of the church had shuddered. It had given way; and though on a dark morning like this its now entire uselessness was observable only to a sharp eye like his own, Alick, who knew the condition of the crumbling stone-work, recognised at once that disaster was only a question of time. He rose to explain to Mr. Bryant, and to bid him send the people away.

CHAPTER XVI

However, the vicar had gone out by the vestry door, and Alick saw him at a little distance under an umbrella, talking to the sexton's wife. The old sexton himself was pulling away listlessly at the bell-rope, and Alick put his hands to his ears as he waited, for the clamour of the cracked and vociferous bell addled his brain. Presently he went back to his pew and sat down again. He was reflecting that Mr. Bryant would by no means thank him for his information. He would be incredulous. Alick knew so many things of the church and of the rocks which Mr. Bryant did not! Mr. Bryant would say with that genial, superficial, supercilious smile of his, which Alick had learned to hate, 'My dear fellow, your thoughts have been dwelling on your rash denunciations till you have made yourself nervous. We will have service as usual, and my sermon about the altar-cloth; and in the course of the week, if Sir Vincent thinks well, the arch and the unsightly iron bar shall be examined.'

Somehow Alick shrank from hearing Mr. Bryant speak thus. He half thought of waiting till the service was over, that no one might connect the

danger he had discovered with the doom he had prophesied, which had failed to come.

And now came the sudden and the horrible suggestion, Might not this thing be of a truth the doom he had foretold? Alick was too utterly confused and lost this morning to recognise anything clearly; he did not discern the prompting of a fiend; but he did feel obscurely that this was not the kind of sign for which he had made supplication.

'Are you not well, my good fellow?' asked Mr. Bryant, kindly; wondering afresh what mischief the hateful fool was after.

'Sir,' said Alick's stiffening lips, 'there is danger. Look up!'

'Pooh!' said the clergyman, good-humouredly.

And the congregation was beginning to arrive; among them Sir Vincent, who saw at once the wild misery on Alick's face and thought he understood it. Vincent kept his eye on him; sane or insane, the poor fool should make no scene in church to-day. That ignorant, resolute, domineering eye chained the prophet to his seat.

The service began, and Mr. Bryant proceeded unmolested. Notwithstanding the storm the congregation was large; for some were interested in the fate of the splendid new altar-cloth, and some in the fate of the prophet's denunciations.

Mr. Bryant preached away very nicely about

superstition and the customs of the church; and once he paused when a fearful blast shook the very walls of the edifice, and Alick Randle half rose in his seat, to be pushed back into his corner by a feather touch from Nannie, and by a stare from the vigilant eye which had taken him in charge. And now the sermon was ended, and Mr. Bryant left the pulpit and took his place, not without an air of triumph, beside the altar, superb with its cardinal velvet, gold embroidery, and hothouse flowers. There was a general sigh of relief. Alick had not interrupted, no judgment had fallen, and the discourse had been tedious.

'Let me pass, Nannie,' murmured Alick, 'I feel ill.' And he rose and moved feebly towards the door, Vincent divining his intent and permitting his departure, but with his own hand on the latch of his pew, ready to act if necessary.

And again the wind-blast shook the frail old church from end to end, and it seemed that the ground shuddered and heaved, and that the storm shrieked at the windows with a warning cry. From far away came a sound like distant thunder. The rocks had again been shattered from the face of the cliffs, under the onset of fierce billows lashed by the furious wind. Alick and all heard the sound, and Alick alone at the moment knew its meaning.

The noise, the rending, the horror were in the

church now. There came a sudden shower of powdering mortar and little fragments of stone upon the transept. Then the iron bar descended with a crash, bringing with it the coping stones of the chancel arch and blocks of crumbling masonry, which for the first bewildering moment seemed to the terror-struck crowd the entire building.

Alick Randle, near the door and away from the danger, gave a cry that was the shriek of a lost spirit.

CHAPTER XVII

THERE are few disasters which do not at the first moment seem worse than they actually are. It presently became clear that Everwell church had not crashed to the ground like a card-house, that after all not much had fallen, and that very few people were hurt.

'Let the women and children go,' said Vincent, quelling an incipient panic; and bade his mother lead them out quietly. Nannie was the only rebel.

'Oh, you—*you* are hurt!' she exclaimed, no one else noticing his bitten lip and clenched hand as he gave his orders.

'What is that noise?' said Vincent, rousing himself.

It was the voice of Samuel Dykes, and all the men in the church, and the women and the children at the door, turned to listen.

'The Lord has made known His power and the divine foreknowledge of Alick Randle, His holy prophet. The prophecy is fulfilled! The judgment is come!! Alick Randle, servant of the Most High, we kneel to thee.'

And he flung himself on the ground before Alick. The heart-broken prophet pushed him away with a groan.

Mr. Bryant's resolution was taken at once. He was in the pulpit, above the ruins, above the crowd and the trembling, miserable Alick. The clergyman rapped with his knuckles on the wood and compelled attention. The people looked and drew nearer; they had looked also at the cowed and shuddering Alick, and had discerned that, alas! there was no help in him.

'Listen now, my good friends,' said Mr. Bryant, 'and don't be such fools as to be carried away by ignorance and alarm. Alick Randle is an *impostor*. He had planned this disaster to impose upon your credulity. I found him here for an unlawful purpose before you assembled. I have watched his abject terror at his own success. I saw him try to escape. I denounce him now as a liar and an impostor and a murderer, who has not hesitated in attempting

wholesale destruction to prop up his tottering and illegitimate authority. Do you deny what I say, Alick Randle?' said the clergyman, raising his voice.

Slowly the young man made his way up the church, feeling his way before him as if he were blind. Then he stood before Mr. Bryant upon the broken chancel steps, his head drooping, like a culprit. Vincent and every one turned their eyes on the prophet and waited for a reply. It did not come for a moment; then a great cry burst from his white lips—

'My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me!'

A little boy took up a stone and threw it at the deposed prophet.

PART VII

EVIL NEWS RIDES POST

CHAPTER I

'COME, papa!' cried Georgina, later, 'I am enchanted to see you. I have been made sceptical by exaggeration. You will tell me the real extent of the mischief.'

His wife also crept to his side and laid her hand in his. 'Ned!' Her tone meant many affectionate things, and he kissed her.

'Dr. Verrill has told me of six persons injured, Georgina,' replied Mr. Bryant. 'Emma, dearest, your brother is one. I fear he is dangerously hurt. They have got him home, though, comfortably, and I sent a message myself for his eldest son. Vincent has had a blow, Georgie, my child. I trust it is nothing serious.'

The girl sat down and thought matters over. After a time she slipped out alone and made her way to the Heights. How unspeakably pretty she looked as she laid her hands in gentle Lady Katharine's, and then, overcome by emotion and modesty, sobbed on the widow's shoulder. 'Ah, do

not be angry with me. Papa will be most dreadfully angry. But I know *you* will understand how I must feel. You won't let Vincent know I came? but if he *should* ask for me—oh, dearest Lady Katharine, let me feel I am *near*. Oh, don't think badly of me for coming. You—you know *all!*'

Lady Katharine was not the woman to send her away.

Before this Nannie, Alick, and Alick's one faithful disciple had walked away silently from the church out into the storm and the rain. Nannie, who knew her dear lover had been hurt, was troubled to have left him, and was in no mood to be kind to Alick. 'Send that man away,' she said imperiously, pointing to Samuel Dykes; and Alick obeyed. When they were alone Nannie stopped and said—

'Lad, was any of it true that the clergyman said of you?'

'Art *thou* going to doubt me, Nannie?'

'You have been so strange this day or two, Alick. Sir Vincent said——'

'You think of no one but Sir Vincent!' burst forth Alick. 'You are driving me mad, Nannie!'

'Alick,' cried Nannie, 'I don't know what to think of these signs and wonders. I'd a deal sooner you had preached without. I can't see what good they do any one, and they make you so strange. I am afraid of you. You were nigh dying of grief

last night because you couldn't keep a man alive, as if God would put life and death into the hands of a man like you! But now you have done worse, and I don't feel sorry for you as I did yesterday; and even if I hurt you I must tell you what I think. For now you have not tried to keep alive—you have tried to kill! And you have hurt, if you haven't killed outright, two people whom I love!' cried Nannie. 'Yes, Alick—my father, who belongs to me, and—and—one whom I love more, and who is far better and nobler than you, and who never thinks of himself at all, and who——' Here Nannie's vehemence landed her in tears. Alick was utterly taken aback by her cruelty. He had expected restoration at her gentle hands, and lo! she was accusing him. He did not guess how upset she was by simple fright at the accident and by Sir Vincent's bruises.

'You do not understand, lassie,' protested Alick, feebly; 'it was not my doing.'

'Ay, it was your doing. Why couldn't you have looked up, Alick, and have seen the arch was broken? You were there before the time. You might have looked about and have seen and have kept the folk away. Then my lover would not have been hurt, and I might have forgiven thee!'

'Won't thou forgive me, Nannie?' She looked at him, surprised by the anguish of his tone. So

far she had been merely railing; now she was struck by his note of confession.

'What do you mean, lad? No, no, I would not forgive you if I thought you could have helped it and did not. Alick, were you so bad as *that?* Tell me the truth. Did you do it on purpose?'

'It's none so easy to tell you, Nannie, when you say you won't forgive me! I will give up trying after goodness,' he cried, his self-control giving way; 'I will lie, and let the devil get my soul, and make thee forgive me. It's thee I care for—not God, nor heaven, nor nought but only thee!'

'Alick, you are wicked!' cried Nannie, shrinking from him. 'If you had been a good man at all you could not say or do such things. I will have no more to do with you. You are wicked!'

It had come—the thing Alick had dreaded. Not the world only, but Nannie, even his Nannie, was saying he had never been led by God at all. He made one appeal, out of the agony of his own tottering faith—

'Nannie, thou shalt listen. I call God, and His Son, and His Holy Spirit to witness——'

'Alick!' shrieked Nannie, 'I will not listen to you blaspheming God. Do not take God to witness. It is enough to make Him smite you!'

She turned from him, not heeding his despairing cry, 'Nannie! Nannie!' She had forsaken him, God

had forsaken him. He had been a liar, a murderer, a blasphemer; possessed by a devil. He was abandoned to him now. The cup of Alick's anguish was full. Nannie stood at a little distance, her strong slender young frame drawn to its full height and her lips curling in passionate horror. Did she speak it out of some unworded reverie, or was it one of the tricks of his overheated fancy that he heard the words in Nannie's silver tones? 'No, no, I never loved you. I hate you now.'

A frenzy came upon him. They were close to the edge of the cliff. He could drag her to the precipice and hurl her and himself over it easily—easily and with demoniac joy. He had dreamed the deed not many days since, and the impulse came to him now with the familiarity of an action already done.

Alick dug his elbows into the yielding turf and fastened his teeth in his clenched fist in the heart-eating effort to withstand that appalling desire. He remembered once striking at Sir Vincent, and the relief it had afforded him to do even that much, though the strong man's easy mastery had daunted him in an instant. Amid the drifting spars of his shipwrecked self-restraint Alick yet saved this much—the consciousness that he had not now to deal with a man more powerful than himself, but with a defenceless girl, who was absolutely in his power. If she were to be saved, he himself alone could be her saviour.

Nannie knew nothing of her danger. She was startled from her indignant reverie by Alick's sudden leap to his feet with a wild, a grating, a horrible laugh, designed to exorcise the devil possessing him, but which paralysed Nannie with fear. She recoiled in terror from his wild looks and unaccountable gestures. Then with sudden realisation of her position she turned to flee. She screamed, but there was none to hear, and he overtook her with one bound. Whether this passion of Alick's were of hate or of love, she was at its mercy.

'Thou canst not escape me, lass!' said Alick, with his savage laugh; 'thy pretty face has sent me to the devil, and thou shalt pay for it.' He had her by the arm, and with resistless force was dragging her to the precipice.

Nannie had no thought but that he was murdering her.

'Wilt thou buy thy life with a kiss, Nannie?' he said; 'I have loved thee long!' Nannie's blood curdled, as again his laugh rang upon the air.

'Push me over if thou wilt, Alick, and have done with it,' shrieked the girl. 'I will not kiss thee.'

He kissed her, however, savagely; all the pent-up passion of years breaking forth. If Nannie could have got away from him she would have leaped over the precipice for escape.

But all the time he was recovering; the wish to slay her had passed; his senses and his self-control were returning; and with them the agony of remorse which belonged to his restored reason.

'If thou hast ever loved me, Alick, let me go!' implored Nannie, beside herself.

He flung her from him upon the grass. Then sprang himself over the edge of the cliff, down to a ledge of jutting uneven rock, where he alighted somehow on his feet, and made another leap to the next shelf, and then on again.

Nannie, terror-struck, crawled to the edge and saw him still on his feet and vigorous, descending the face of the cliff where assuredly he, if any one, had never climbed before—till he reached the beach, deserted at this place and hour. Then he looked up and saw her watching him.

'Nannie!' cried Alick, 'I have loved thee well!' And he fled along the lonely shore, out into the storm wind as if the fiends were pursuing him.

CHAPTER II

NANNIE'S strength was exhausted by the struggle, and the fear, than which no suffering is worse. An hour later, at four o'clock, when the stormy autumn

day was already darkening, she was still there upon the grass, alone and nerveless, where Alick had left her. She was thinking it all over, and vaguely recalling the events of the day, and how she had risen early and had gone to church at twelve o'clock as usual on Sunday; and the minister, Mr. Bryant, who was her uncle, had preached a long sermon; and the prophet's foretold doom had come; and her father and her dear lover were hurt. And she had railed at Alick thoughtlessly and unkindly till she had driven him wild. 'He might have killed me,' she said; 'Alick was never one to think what he was doing when he was angry. But he kissed me. And now Sir Vincent will never kiss me again, for I cannot wash the mark of Alick's lips away!' She sobbed, poor child, shaken and miserable, and deserted—sobbed with passionate vehemence. Those tears did her good. She felt more like a frightened crying child who wants a mother's protection; less like a heartsick woman with the weight of the world on slender shoulders.

After a time she struggled to her feet and crept wearily away. 'I will go to him,' she murmured, 'I will go and tell my dear lover everything. He will know what to do about Alick; and I think he will speak kindly to me.' Nannie thought with dreary defiance how little she cared now should any one be surprised by her seeking the gentleman.

Alick had injured her too much in her own esteem for her to care longer if she suffered in the esteem of others for her true lover's sake. It seemed to Nannie that the only thing which could in the least console her for what she had endured, would be to throw herself into Vincent's arms in the sight of the whole world, no matter what any one thought of her conduct. But she was too thoroughly tired and weakened to walk fast. Her knees gave way under her, and often she paused to rest, sometimes running a few steps, though that meant supervening exhaustion and a sitting down on the damp wayside to recruit her failing strength. 'Oh, it is very, very far,' said Nannie; 'the path must have stretched, I think. I shall never get to him.' Still she pictured her lover nursing his bruises alone in the comfortable library which John had once let her peep into; and then herself welcomed and sitting by him on the soft sofa with his dear arm round her and his lips upon her hair, while she told him all.

At the lodge, the gatekeeper was talking to a friend about the accident, and did not interrupt herself to address Nannie. Old John, too, at the house, let her pass without a question, only greeting her with, 'Hey, my pretty lass, thy sweetheart should have promised, like his Master, to build the temple again in three days. But don't thee take on about him, my pretty little lass.'

Nannie made no answer. She walked past John like one in a dream, and no one stopped her. She opened the library door, looking for the welcome and the embrace all just as she had fancied it. But the room was empty, left as it had been primly tidied by the ugly housemaid. It had not been used to-day. She returned to the hall, where she had once sat on a carved chair, and Sir Vincent, whom she had come to fetch that he might comfort Alick, had himself brought her a cup of tea from the drawing-room before she went out with him for their first long walk together in the dark. Did any one but herself remember that incident? Ah yes! he did, she was sure, for he had loved her even then! —long, long ago, before Nannie had loved him! She smiled to herself, remembering how his hand had trembled as he gave her that tea; and how he had then been nothing—or—well, hardly anything to her! But Sir Vincent was not in the hall to-day. A strange gentleman suddenly appeared, and with him was little Dr. Verrill, his coat off and his eyes dancing with pleasurable excitement. Nannie stood aside to let them pass. 'Perhaps you are right,' said the stranger; 'I have not encountered your theory before, but it seems plausible.'

'Nannie Randle,' said Dr. Verrill, 'go home and change your stockings. You have no time for catching cold at present; your parent, I regret to

say, is an unwholesome, carnivorous, apoplectic subject.' Nannie hardly attended and made no answer. Dr. Verrill passed out.

Mr. Kane remained. He looked at her for a minute, then touched her familiarly on the arm. 'What are you doing here?' he asked, abruptly, still surveying her with an interest which Nannie, who knew nothing about him, did not understand. Offended, she twitched her shoulder away and walked on with too much dignity to heed where she was going. She began mechanically to ascend the stair. Who was this rude man, and why did he follow her? She ran heedlessly on, her light foot making no sound on the thickly carpeted stair. Mr. Kane turned back. 'This must be put a stop to at all hazards,' he said to himself. 'Look here, John,' said the honourable gentleman, 'there's a little girl gone upstairs with a message to her ladyship. When she comes down, send her to me in the library. Do you hear?'

'That's Nannie Randle, sir,' said John the officious; 'she's a sweet, pretty creature, barring her red hair, and the sweetheart of Alick, the holy prophet.'

'John is right,' said Mr. Kane, retreating, 'she is a very pretty creature; too pretty for the prophet and certainly, as poor Emma says, far too pretty for Vincent. Well, I will find out a little what she is made of.'

Nannie reached the top of the first stair and went blindly along the passage, hoping she should meet no one, and meaning to descend again the moment that very familiar gentleman had disappeared. It was already dusk in the gloomy old house; and her heart beat with mere childish shyness. She paused, hiding by the dark curtain of the small high-up window, with its immense depth of wall and wide sill. What if some one came and thought her a thief? She could not tell any one she was looking for Sir Vincent. It was all old John's fault; John was always so stupid. It was not easy to know how to ask for Sir Vincent. 'Oh, if he would only come!' thought Nannie.

Presently some one opened a door on the opposite side of the passage and looked out—a tall woman's figure, and the girl shrank up into her curtain as a voice said, 'I thought I heard some one moving out there. Don't you think we should have a light, dearest Lady Katharine? and the fire grows hot. May I leave the door open for a minute?'

Nannie felt glued to the ground; it seemed impossible now that she should ever get away from her hiding-place. She was afraid to look round. 'Oh, if he would only come!' she repeated to herself.

The scrape of a match within the room made her turn involuntarily; could it be he? For a

minute she could see only the glare from the newly-lighted candle; then something at the far side of a large room like a sofa, and a dark figure sitting beside it. Then, as the flame of a newly lighted candle will, the light died down, and for a few seconds the room was dark as before; then it flared up, and Nannie rubbed her eyes, and saw everything distinctly. The seated figure with back to the door was Lady Katharine. She was watching some one who lay upon the couch—a long nerveless figure with outstretched quiet hands and a white face. The eyes were open, rather restless and puzzled in expression. It was Sir Vincent. Nannie's heart died within her. She forgot everything else. A cry rose to her lips, and she pressed forward to get to his side. Why, oh why had she ever left him, even at his own command, when she had known before any one else that he was hurt?

Yet at the door Nannie paused, for she was not so carried away by love or anything else as to force herself in upon his mother without a moment's consideration. His mother! But there was another woman in the room too. Vincent stirred uneasily and looked round in a helpless, appealing way at this person, who was fidgeting the candlestick, and his lips moved. Then he stretched his hand towards her, perhaps to stop the rattling and the flickering, perhaps for something he wanted. 'You

want Georgina, darling?' said Lady Katharine, softly, pushing the hair off his brow as if he were her little boy again. Miss Bryant handed, a little awkwardly and roughly, so thought poor Nannie, the drop of water or whatever it was he was supposed to want. She looked very tall and erect and not somehow as if she cared very much. But Vincent? He smiled and faintly nodded at her with a pleased and grateful air, which Nannie saw if Georgina didn't. In truth, Vincent (who had remained on actively helping at the scene of the accident, till badly stunned in a second and more extensive descent of stonework) was pleased and grateful, for the cold water was reviving; and he smiled at the giver because it was too laborious to speak. But he had no clearer notion of his benefactress than that she was some charitable woman with a soft hand, one of his maiden aunts most likely, who was helping his mother. He understood that his mother was there by his side, and he knew he was all right, and was not in the least anxious or worried about anything. But he had not so much as recognised Georgina. How could Nannie guess all that? She saw his upward gaze, long because languid; and she saw his smile. And then she could bear no more. She burst into tears there outside his door; her hands clasped and her head leaning against the wall of the gloomy passage which led to his room.

It was not till the child sobbed that Georgina took notice of her presence. Now she started back from the sofa with a scared face, exclaiming in a hoarse whisper, not loud enough to attract the attention of the stupefied Vincent, 'Oh, look—look at that dreadful girl! She must not come here!' Lady Katharine, much alarmed, turned to the open door. For a moment she could not conceive who the dishevelled, rain-stained, weeping young creature could be. Then she remembered all sorts of imaginary horrors. 'Oh, do please take her away!' gasped Georgina; 'this is terrible! Suppose he were to see her!' Lady Katharine rose swiftly and moved out of the room, shutting the door after her and leaving her son in Miss Bryant's care.

CHAPTER III

THEN it was not the handsome Caroline! There was a measure of relief in that discovery. This seemed a gentle, yielding creature, not pretty enough to have a strong hold upon Vincent; for weather-beaten Nannie was not looking her best just then; and, like John, Lady Katharine regarded red hair as a deformity. The widow was a woman easily

seduced into kindness. She took the child's hand and led her to her own room. Nannie stumbled about over unexpected steps in the darkness of the passage and the lady had to support her; compassion filled the good woman's heart as she seated the sobbing girl on the sofa by her side, and, still holding the little tear-stained hand, said, gently though firmly, 'My poor child, you must not come here; I cannot permit it for a moment.'

'Is he very ill?' moaned Nannie, 'is he dying?'

'No,' replied Lady Katharine, cheerfully and kindly.

Nannie gazed wistfully at the gentle lady to see if she spoke the truth, and Lady Katharine studied the poor little anxious face, and felt extremely angry with Vincent.

'Oh, if I might only do something for him!' murmured Nannie.

'He has all he wants,' said the widow. 'Miss Bryant is with him.' Then she continued, 'Miss Bryant and Sir Vincent are greatly attached to each other. I hope soon she will be Lady Leicester.' Nannie snatched her hand away and sat up very straight, and said nothing. There was something in the slight emphasis her ladyship put upon 'Miss' and 'Sir' and 'Lady Leicester' that made her

breath come in quick gasps and her heart give a sudden bound. He had offered to make her little self 'Lady Leicester!' Nannie thought she had never realised what it all meant before.

It was very silly; Nannie would not have done it another day when she had not had so many shocks; she hated herself for it. But after twisting a corner of her dress desperately, and looking at the toy terrier who was whining and licking her hand in sympathy; and pinching herself, and even trying secretly to repeat a hymn to divert her mind, she suddenly succumbed to another burst of hysterical sobs, burying her face in her hands in vexation and shame, and abandoning all attempts to keep up her dignity.

'My poor, poor child!' said Lady Katharine. And then she began the inevitable expostulations. 'My son has been very wrong,' said the lady, 'very, very wrong. My dear, for your own sake, I must say to you once and for all, *never* see him again. At whatever cost to yourself, put an end to it all from this moment.'

'No, no,' pleaded Nannie, 'he has not been wrong. He has been very, very good to me. He wants to marry me!'

'Oh, my poor little girl, has he let you think that? My dear, it is quite and entirely out of the question. Never think of it again, my poor child.

It could not be. You would make each other most miserable.'

'I know. I told him so,' said Nannie, but so faintly that Lady Katharine misunderstood her.

'I am afraid, my dear, Sir Vincent never really thought of it. He has been very, very wrong. I am not trying to excuse him. I can only hope he did not understand that you were seriously believing in him. He has been attached to Miss Bryant for a very long time,' continued Lady Katharine; 'long before ever he came here he was her declared lover. They are quite suited. She loves him deeply and they will be very happy together. If for a time he —oh, how wrong of him!—let his fancy stray to some one else, half seriously—he must overcome that. He turns now to his true love. He is very happy at this moment with Miss Bryant tending on him. My dear, you must think of him as already tied. You are not so selfish as to want to steal another woman's husband?'

'But he is not her husband!' said Nannie. 'Will Miss Bryant not care if—if—he and I——'

'That depends,' replied the lady, 'on how far it has gone between you and him. Some things no one would ask her to forgive.' Lady Katharine paused and looked searchingly at the girl. Nannie's heart beat till she felt sick, but she was too dispirited for vociferous indignation. She rose.

'If you please, my lady, I am not quite sure what you mean; but I have done nothing for any one to forgive,' she said with quivering lips.

'Sit down, my dear,' said the lady, kindly. 'I do not think you have been intentionally wrong, though you have been most foolish. You must let me help you out of your troubles, will you? Do not interrupt me, dear child. I know how painful it is to hear any one blamed whom we love. It is very painful to me to blame my son, for I love him most dearly myself. But for the sake of your precious character, Nannie, I must speak, and you will help me by listening silently, won't you?'

'But you don't understand him!' cried Nannie, her hand on his ring; and she would have said more, but again those silly tears stopped her.

'Ah, my child, I fear I understand better than you do. I know only too well there can be no question of marriage between Sir Vincent and you. And therefore any sort of flirtation—and that is all it has been with him—is distinctly wrong. And most dangerous, Nannie. Believe me, my dear. Sir Vincent, I am sure, ought to marry Miss Bryant,' said Lady Katharine; 'he has led her to expect it. If he can explain to her that it was only a passing fancy for you, Nannie, and that he deeply repents it; that he will never see you again, and that his allegiance has returned to her from whom it ought

never to have swerved, Miss Bryant is such a noble woman that I believe she will pardon him, and they will devote themselves to making each other happy. They will be happy, because they have the same tastes, friends, interests, ways of life. When that is not the case, a man and a woman very quickly drift apart and come to great misery. I know, and Sir Vincent knows perfectly well, whatever he may have said to you, and you will know, my dear, if you will think it over, that you could be no companion to him, and he would not be any better able to be a companion to you. He must marry a lady; and you will be far happier in the station to which God has called you; I hope in a little while the wife of some good, honest, working man.' Nannie sat long silent, and the lady hoped she had made an impression; but she began to perceive that the girl was very, very pretty, and to reflect that Vincent would not give her up without a struggle. Nannie was thinking less of the kind lady's platitudes than of her lover's smile at Georgina.

'My dear,' said Lady Katharine, 'he will get over this fancy for you if you are firm and do not encourage it. It rests with you, my child, whether all this folly and wrong of his is done away without any great mischief to yourself or him, or whether you and he, and alas! others too, have to go through

great suffering, and perhaps to feel pain and remorse to the very day of your deaths. You would not like to cause him great pain, Nannie?'

'No, my lady, I would rather die,' said Nannie.

'Did I not hear,' said Lady Katharine, cautiously, 'that it was expected you would marry your cousin, the preacher?' The girl started and crimsoned painfully. She shook her head; but the lady detected there was 'something' between her and Alick. 'My dear, you must be careful how you encourage attentions from any man unless you mean to make him some return. Do you know what the physician, who saw that young man at my son's request, said of him? He asked if he had not been crossed in love. Would it not be a sad thing, my dear child (for the sake of a folly which I quite believe has been innocent so far, but which cannot go on being innocent now your eyes are opened), that a sweet girl like you should break that good man's heart?'

Nannie was silent. She had for a moment thought of confiding in the gentle lady; but it was impossible. No one would understand her relation to Alick; even to Nannie herself it seemed that his unpermitted embrace had raised a barrier between herself and Vincent, which only Vincent himself could explain away. And would he? Suppose the lady were right, and if she, Nannie, were out of the

way, he would be happy; returned to his first love, of whose existence he had told her himself, at whom he had smiled? Ah, that smile! Would she ever be able to forget it?

Lady Katharine called her maid and directed her to show Nannie out. She hoped she had effected something; and even Vincent could not accuse her of unkindness to the poor, infatuated child. Dealing with her son seemed far more difficult to the timid widow; happily for the present he was *hors de combat*, and only fit to be spoiled and petted.

CHAPTER IV

NANNIE, under Miss Robinson's guardianship, was nearing the hall door when she was detained by John; and Mr. Kane himself appeared, saying he had a note he wished her to take for him to her father.

'Well, if it ain't enough to turn that girl's head,' said the lady's-maid to the butler, 'the way all the men take notice of her. My lady's brother putting her to sit in the library indeed! And I've seen Sir Vincent 'and her the sugar-basin like she was his sister. No one never asked me into no libraries when I was fifteen nor five and thirty

neither, nor gave me tea in a china-cup, with sugar or without. And *I* never was draggled like that there Nannie, and *my* father was a tradesman.'

'It's looks as does it,' said John, grimly; 'the men keep their place uncommon easy when a female has looks like yourn.'

Nannie waited listlessly in the library till she became aware that this extraordinary gentleman was not getting on with his note, but was looking at her with far more interest than she could understand or like. She rose. 'Is the letter for my father ready, if you please, sir?'

'Not quite. They call you Nannie, I think?' said the gentleman; 'did you see Sir Vincent, Nannie?'

'No, sir. I saw her ladyship.'

'Did she speak to you about Sir Vincent?' Nannie was more alarmed than she could explain to herself.

'If you will give me the note, sir,' she faltered, 'I will go home at once.'

'Oh, the note is humbug,' said Mr. Kane, tossing it into the fire and rising; 'come now, don't be frightened, I want to speak to *you*.' Nannie was frightened.

'I cannot think you have anything to do with me, sir,' she said.

'No,' replied Mr. Kane, 'I suppose not.' After

a pause he continued gravely, 'Probably I should not thrust myself in your way, Nannie, if I did not happen to know that you have got into an uncomfortable and perhaps a mischievous complication with two singularly unsuitable lovers, which I and all persons interested in you would like to see you well out of.' Mr. Kane for once in his life was in earnest, but he was a comedian by nature, and had played maliciously too long to keep a touch of light scorn out of his tone as he spoke of the child's two lovers, and Nannie was quick to detect it.

'Sir,' she said, steadily, 'if I have two honest, good, noble lovers, their love is a solemn and a holy and a good thing, and I will not have it spoke light of. What business is it of yours, sir?' she ended, desperately.

'I am afraid I shall startle you if I say.' There was a short silence, and Nannie's vague terror was increasing. She almost thought of calling John. 'Mrs. Bryant spoke to you once of a child named Mary,' said Mr. Kane. 'If I tell you a little more, you will be discreet and remember that you must not spread scandals?'

'I don't want to hear nothing about it!' cried the girl; but he went on unheeding—

'There are one or two persons, Nannie, who feel a moral certainty—in a day or two I shall make it an absolute certainty—that there is a mistake about

you. Nannie Randle had high cheek bones, depend upon it, and a red face like Caroline's. I believe you are not Nannie Randle at all, but that little girl they called Mary Smith.'

'Who dares to say such a thing?' exclaimed Nannie, panic-struck.

'If I have told you,' said Mr. Kane, so seriously now that she could not but attend, 'believe me it is with the intention of benefiting you. Your parents did you an injury; they would like now to be of service to you. If you had not been so neatly dissolved into somebody else it would have been more easily accomplished; but still it shall be managed somehow.'

'Then did you know Mrs. Smith, sir?' asked the bewildered Nannie, 'and that bad wicked man who deceived and killed her?'

'Did he deserve those adjectives? Yes. I know him too. He lives chiefly in America. He is a lonely, unfortunate wretch without one tie or stake in life. It has been a matter of interest to him to find he has a daughter alive—and beautiful, Miss Nannie. He sees it would be desirable for her to leave this place, and he would like to take her away to the other side of the world and make her a lady. At least he has some such scheme in his head, if he can manage it quietly and comfortably for all parties.'

'Without her consent?' said Nannie, flushed and shivering.

'Oh, he would gain her consent when she understood that he could make her a fine lady instead of a farmhouse nobody.'

'If it is me you mean, sir,' said Nannie, 'I have wished sometimes to be a lady, yes! But I would not care to have anything to do with a man of that sort, not if he was my father, nor no one. I've been used to honest people all my life, and should hate to be among any other!'

'Mrs. Bryant exaggerated his crimes to you. You would find him much like anybody else. Come, would you like him to be indifferent to his pretty daughter's existence? or to leave her an innocent cheat personating somebody else, and among people who don't want her?' Nannie was silent; she felt stunned. 'Let the idea simmer in your brain, my dear. But one hint for you to shape your present conduct by. You will not be allowed either of the two lovers we alluded to.'

'That's for me to say, sir.'

'It is the one point upon which we all agree. We are all resolved that you shall be worried out of Everwell, for as surely as you stay here you will fall a prey to one of those men. And to put it plainly, the one is as much too good for you as the other is not good enough. Come, your father's daughter is

bound to show a little common sense in her affairs of the heart. There are other fish in the sea, Nannie; a great many more—and bigger ones—in America than in the village of Everwell.'

The gentleman's calm tone in disposing of her fate frightened her. She sank panting into a chair and stared at him. 'I don't believe it is true,' she said.

'I will prove it to you in a few days. You will be discreet till I give you leave to speak?'

'I have not promised not to tell what you say, sir. I shall speak of it at once to my father—him whom I considered my father; and maybe to Mrs. Bryant, who knew her—that poor Mrs. Smith.'

'You had better speak to Mrs. Bryant first. She will appeal more powerfully to your discretion than I can.'

'What is the name of the man you say is my father, sir?'

'Ask Mrs. Bryant.'

'In America, you said?'

'I said he lived chiefly in America. It is a pleasant country, Nannie—a country where pretty girls are liked. You would get on well there.'

'No, sir,' said Nannie, 'I should never get on well unless I was with people whom I loved and respected, and who loved and respected me.'

Her lip trembled, but she faced the man boldly

with her grave eyes unfaltering and her soft voice distinct and clear. He shrugged his shoulders. It was enough for to-day to have made her acquaintance. So he took her to the door and let her go.

'Emma can tell her the rest,' he said to himself. 'I think I am rather afraid of her. By Jove, though, she is a most lovely girl! The grave, sober, good little thing about her lovers! She can take care of herself, I fancy. She has more sense and more character than her mother. All the same she has got herself into a scrape with Vincent—d—n him! I suppose I shall have eventually to tell Katharine the whole thing. I can't be a party with friend Bryant in imposing her upon the already suspicious bucolic; and some scandal was inevitable once Emma and I had met. The Bryants must clear off out of this, and the sooner the better, and I must hand the child over to Katharine if she won't take to me. Katharine's sense of duty would make her kind to her, and I should to a certainty get tired of the chit before I had had her two months on my shoulders,' he said, sneering. Nevertheless what remnant of heart he had, Nannie had somehow succeeded in touching. He was determined to save her at least from Vincent.

CHAPTER V

THE girl had not gone far before she sat down to weep. In her whole life put together she had never been so overwhelmingly miserable. Sorrow had invaded her suddenly upon all sides; heavy storm-clouds and a night of thick shadow rested upon her future. 'I have no longer two lovers,' she mourned; 'if I am an impostor and the child of such bad, disgraceful, wicked people, no one will want me for a sweetheart any longer.'

She sat long with heart aching to distraction, watching the dull light fading in the gloomy, tempest-torn west. The wind had fallen now—only reviving now and then in a short sighing gust like the last exhausted sobs of a great weeping. The tide too was at its lowest, and though there were white horses chafing upon the sea, the billows no longer thundered against the battered and trembling cliffs. There is something numbing in great pain, and as Nannie sat there and sorrowed, her thoughts were not very distinct nor intelligent. There was only one clear result of the day's woes to her. She must give her dear lover up. Her love, her king, her bright particular star! Fate had intervened, and not the gods themselves are strong enough to fight against Fate.

Fate had taken her lover away from her for ever. It seemed to Nannie that for weeks things had been tending this way, and this one day's work had just brought in the end. He had told her himself that she must give him up unless she were prepared to abandon Alick entirely from that moment. And right or wrong she had not abandoned Alick in the way he had meant. Nay, she had been more with her cousin, more tender to him than before. She had not liked it, but escape had been somehow impossible. She had held his hand; he had leaned his head against her breast; to-day, alas! alas! he had kissed her. 'It has not made me his—*no!*' she cried, indignantly, 'but it has robbed me of my sweetheart. The lady said I must put a barrier between him and me. She did not know it was there already!'

And now there were all these other things. Lady Katharine had told her plainly that for Sir Vincent to marry her would spoil his life. Lady Katharine had said that Vincent would love Miss Bryant again, if she, Nannie, were out of the way. Nannie had only to believe it to give him up. And Vincent had told her himself that he had loved Miss Bryant! and ah! that unlucky smile of his was confirmation.

'May I not see him again?' she questioned, sadly. 'The lady said not. But would he not

think me faithless? Oh, I am not—I am not. I must tell him so. But it is better he should think me faithless than that I should spoil his life! No, I will not have him think that! I will write to him and send him back his ring. Shall I tell him I saw him smile at her? No; he would think I was angry. He would think he had done something wrong. He has not! I will only tell him I have given it all up, and that I don't want to see him again. And that he is not to be sad thinking of me, for he has never given me anything but great happiness. Only he must not think me faithless. I could not bear it. For myself, I shall be an old maid like Miss Verrill, and I shall think of him every day. And perhaps in the next world—ah, no! She will be there too! Oh, it is giving him up for ever—for ever! I wish I could like Miss Bryant better!' said poor Nannie, rising and clenching her hand; 'and I should like to know it from himself! *He* told me he had given up caring for her. Oh, my love—my love!'

She was in the glen now; her lover's glen, where he used to come and kiss her. Never again—never, never again.

Nannie discerned a figure coming away from the farmhouse, and she waited with a weary feeling of disgust. It was Mrs. Bryant, who had been to inquire for her injured brother.

Remembrance flashed across Nannie. The strange gentleman had bidden her seek confirmation of his tale from this very woman; she would do it at once. 'And oh!' moaned the girl, 'it is the end of everything! If there were no other reason for giving him up, this is reason enough. I was not fit to mate with him before, but now—— Even the light-spoken gentleman said so! He said my father in America would make me a lady, but that nothing could make me good enough for Sir Vincent!' Nannie pressed her hand to her side, and waited for Mrs. Bryant. And the woman embraced her—oh so lovingly.

Nannie drew away and sat down on a rock beside the path and looked at Emma so gravely and questioningly that the woman divined instinctively that their relation was changed. For the warmth of her caress had recalled a suspicion to Nannie's mind. Patty and Caroline had talked of it in their coarse way often enough lately, and though Nannie had scouted the idea in words, it had taken some hold of her mind.

'I believe, girls,' Patty had said, 'that Mary Smith was *Mrs. Bryant's own.*'

'Aunt Emma,' said Nannie, her eyes dark and mournful in the dusk, 'could a person go about among others and mix with them, and do the same things they were doing, and talk about little stupid

matters, and all the while have a dark corner in her heart full of ghosts that no one knew anything about ?'

'Yes, yes, Nannie!' said the woman, stretching out yearning hands.

'What are the ghosts, Aunt Emma ?'

'There are many, Nannie! Oh so many. One is afraid to look at them. The ghost of lost happiness——'

'No, no,' interrupted Nannie, 'that is a crown. I would not put that in the dark corner! I would not be afraid to look at that!'

'The things one has lost, Nannie; hopes that came to nothing, pleasure that changed to pain; loneliness; and fear, which is worst of all—desires which were baffled, and yet went on—on—aching for ever.' Again the mother spread out her hands to her child and her breath choked.

'I could bear all that,' said the girl, steadily, 'I would not be without it. If it was a good thing I had wanted and might not have!'

'It is pain, Nannie. To some people too much to bear.' Nannie thought of Alick; and was silent.

'There are other things,' continued Emma: 'to be despised——' The girl started, and trembled, and awaked from her reverie. She had more to think of than just her two lovers; for one of whom

her heart ached, while the other's ached for her! Her eyes sought the sorrowing face of the woman who loved her; and for a moment Nannie was cruel, and for a moment she wreaked vengeance for her grief upon one who was guiltless of it and who would have shed her life-blood for her child.

'And disgraced?' said Nannie, bitterly. Mrs. Bryant felt the keen blade of a knife enter into her soul, as the girl asked this meaning question in her clear, soft voice; the voice of a sinless angel—it seemed, of an unloving judge.

'Mary! Mary!' said Emma, and buried her face in her hands, unable to bear the condemnation of her child. And Nannie understood that this was her mother. The moment for which poor Emma had long waited was come at last.

'Who was it?' said the girl, later. 'Who was my father?'

'Did he not tell you that? Did he not tell you all?'

'No; and I did not want to talk to that gentleman. I don't like him.'

'You must not ask me who it was, Mary. You'll be fond of him when you know him, darling!'

'How did I get changed into Nannie Randle?'

'I cannot tell you, Mary.' The girl moved away

with a movement of displeasure. Mrs. Bryant had done it herself, perhaps.

'Aunt Emma, how could you go about deceiving every one? And how could you love a wicked man like that?'

'Mary, do you want to break your poor mother's heart? If you were older, you would not say such cruel things. You would know that there is many a woman has loved a bad man and got into trouble for him!'

'And when you had a child—a child! oh, think what a serious thing a child is! How could you have pretended you hadn't, and tried to get rid of it?'

'Oh, my darling! my dearest! I know you are right. And that was indeed the dreadful sin, and all my trouble has been punishment!' Had the girl been sympathetic, Mrs. Bryant would have poured the whole story out in so far as she knew it; Mr. Kane had quickly drawn it from her. But before this severe young judge she could only weep and feel like a prisoner at the bar, who pleads guilty, and stammers incompletely truthful answers.

'How *could* you do it?' cried Nannie, misunderstanding.

'Mary—there was Mr. Bryant,' said Emma.

All Nannie gathered was that Mr. Bryant knew nothing about it.

'I shall speak to him myself!' cried Nannie, quivering with indignation.

Emma caught her arm in terror. 'My dear! my dear! don't do that! You do not know Mr. Bryant. I have had fearful work with him as it is! He is angry with me now. If you go and speak to him, Nannie, you will make him cast me off, I do really believe. He does not love me like he used. My dear, my dear, he's all I've got now! He has been a good husband, and I have been a good wife, and if he got turned against me, I don't know what would become of me, Nannie! And indeed, dear, you weren't left to starve. You had a happier home than ever I could have made you with no brothers and sisters.'

'As if I cared for that when I've been an impostor! It was just the most cruel thing you could do, to make me an impostor. No one will love me or honour me any more when they learn I have been an impostor! And I have given myself airs and gone about preaching with Alick, and despising people who lived wickedly, and all the time my mother was a woman without a husband, and deceitful! And I don't know who my father was except that he was a wicked, wicked liar, who didn't even love my mother and see she and her baby were taken care of.'

'My dear! my dear!' moaned the poor woman.

'But I won't go on being an impostor!' cried Nannie; 'I shall go straight away this minute and tell *every one!*'

'Mary!'

'I am sorry I can't be kinder to you,' said the girl, bitterly. 'It has all come upon me like a shock, and on top of all the other things. And you are a stranger to me and live in a fine house among ladies and gentlemen, and you have that grand Miss Bryant to love you; and how can *I* love you all of a sudden, when I begin by hearing such things of you? and,' cried Nannie, bursting into tears, 'when I am only a poor girl, only fit to be among working people, and who knows nothing of the ways of gentlefolk, and can't ever hope to be a companion to any one of that sort!'

'My dear! my dear!' repeated Mrs. Bryant, who had lost the thread and only knew that Nannie was blaming her. Oh, it was hard, when she loved the child so, and had wanted her so long!

CHAPTER VI

And at last Nannie reached her home and crept in at the back door, her poor face white and

scarred, her clothes drenched, her hand trembling and clenched miserably within its fellow. She was making her way to her own room when she met Caroline,—a person who always rubbed her fur the wrong way.

'Well, I declare!' said the elder sister, who still wore her Sunday best, but spotted and spoiled as if she had been working in it. 'Here you are at last! Come now, stir up this mustard; I have done my share. Where have you been? Drinking with your mother-in-law?'

'Who is the mustard plaster for, Caroline?' asked Nannie.

'For father, of course, stupid. Much you care about your father, going off for the whole day like this. Come now, where have you been?'

'I had to go with Alick.'

'Going to try a few stories, are you? We know better than that, and you are to be punished for your goings on, I can tell you. With your dear Alick, were you? He has been here looking for you.'

'Alick been here?'

'Oh, you are frightened now, I suppose. Well, if I were Alick, I shouldn't trouble no more over such a deceitful girl as you. But there's no accounting for some men's taste. Even Alick couldn't think you pretty if he saw you now, my dear,' said

the jealous beauty. 'He left that for you,' ended Caroline, throwing a bulky envelope at her sister, inscribed with Alick's upright, narrow, and irregular but legible writing. 'Don't stop to read it now, child; get off those filthy shoes and come down and make yourself some use.'

'I am not coming down,' said Nannie, angrily; 'I am a great deal more tired than you. Let me alone, Caroline.'

'You are the most selfish, horrid thing I ever saw,' said Caroline, the lady of the family, retreating.

Nannie locked her door, saying to herself, 'I am sure Lady Katharine or Miss Bryant never spoke like that! Even Caroline isn't a lady like them; what must I be who never learnt any manners at all?' Then, sad as she was, she smiled to herself. 'But it was *me* he liked; not Caroline.'

The farmer just at this juncture was in the charge of Joe, the simple and stolid, who was never frightened at undertaking anything. 'Lord bless us! leave him to me,' he had said to the anxious Patty; 'I've nursed the cows oftener nor any one.'

So Patty had gone to the hall, where were assembled her eldest brother and his wife, lately arrived, and Mr. Bryant.

'Fire away, parson,' said John Randle, who hated Mr. Bryant and was inclined to be insolent, 'and

use plain English if you can; we ain't Hebrew scholars.' Mr. Bryant did not relish his tone.

'I suppose you know,' he said, slowly, 'that I have been anxious about your sister for some time?'

'Much obliged, I am sure. Ain't there something in the Articles, parson, about works of supererogation?'

'Mr. Bryant, you never told us!' said Patty, reproachfully.

'My wife did, I think? No? She has taken a fancy to your sister, poor girl.'

'Poor girl? poor girl? Hebrew again, sir? Pretty girl, I call her.'

'John, hold your tongue,' said his wife. 'Would the gentleman kindly tell us what has happened to Nannie?'

'Oh dear! oh dear!' ejaculated Patty.

Mr. Bryant addressed Mrs. John. He shook his head. 'I am very, very much afraid that her intimacy with, her betrothal to—'

'Keeping company with,' suggested John.

'—that young man Alick has been a mere blind to us all. He is much to be pitied, for I believe he has not a suspicion——'

'Oh, d—n it! Let the hunchback look after himself. You ain't sorry for him a bit, parson, for you've been abusing him this half hour. Get on to the point, do.'

'John, don't be saucy,' said his wife.

'The point is disagreeable to me,' said the clergyman, 'not only on your sister's account. I hope, I *hope* she will prove to have been a mere vain and thoughtless child; but on account of one whom, till this melancholy infatuation overtook him, I was pleased to call my friend, my——'

'Your son-in-law maybe? We needn't name the gent if it hurts your feelings. We can all guess at him. He's been carrying on with Nannie, has he?'

'La, John, you are coarse!' sobbed Patty, and John threatened to send the women out of the room. Mr. Bryant went on in his measured tones—

'I have this evening received a communication from Lady Katharine Leicester, which I fear explains part of your unhappy sister's absence this afternoon, and which, I regret to say, confirms my worst anxieties. Shall I read it to you?' John snatched the document from the offended clergyman and backed towards his wife. Then he began to read the letter aloud, occasionally interrupting himself to laugh—

'My dear Mr. Bryant—Your sweet Georgina is kindly staying with me to comfort me in my anxiety, and I may tell you in confidence that I perceived with the greatest relief and satisfaction my dearest boy's *rapture* upon seeing her with me

and solicitous about him. I do trust and pray most earnestly that all may yet be well with them both, and that this slight accident of V—'s may have the effect of ending their miserable estrangement. But for this end something must be done *at once* about——'

John read the rest of the letter to himself, twice, whistling now and then. Mrs. John, however, felt his hand trembling on the back of her chair, and knew that he was really in considerable agitation.

'John, for mercy's sake, tell us what it is!' said Patty, in an agony. He still whistled for a few moments. Then he put the letter in his pocket.

'Females are fidgets,' he said, 'and her ladyship puts in too many words. There's all I've got to say. Now I'm going to have a pipe and to look round the place. Good night, parson. I hope you'll get your precious son-in-law. He seems a good sort, and popular with the women,' ended John; and sent Patty back to her father, remarking that in his opinion the Governor was in a bad way. Then he called his wife to him outside the door. 'You go and do up your traps, missus,' he said, 'and set Caroline or some one to do up the girl's. For off you two go, back to Faverton to-night; and if you don't hold her tight and keep her safe till I come to you, you'll catch it.'

'It's serious then, John?'

'Can't say; but she don't stay here. Do you understand now? I must remain to look after the Gov., and to see what I can make of Humpy, and maybe to give a bit of cheek to H.R.H. if I get a candid opportunity. Go away now.'

Then Mr. John, alone with Mr. Bryant, changed his tone and asked seriously—

'Come now, sir, if I send my sister away I must know the truth, and whether she's to be allowed back after she's tired tearing her hair. How far has this matter gone?' Mr. Bryant reflected. To be rid of Nannie was his darling wish. He shook his head.

'In another place, with other surroundings,' he said, sadly, 'she may retrieve herself, but here——'

CHAPTER VII

ALICK'S letter: 'You will not see me, Nannie? Because for one five minutes, for the first time after all these years of our love, when I was in a state of spiritual misery such as you have no guess of,—I did what I should not have done, and said words in my passion to fright you, and forgot my promise and kissed you, lassie, against your will. And now you have cast me away and will not see me. Nannie, you are unjust and you are cruel. Did not that

other man kiss you without leave and you forgave him, though he had no right to be your lover, lass? Thou shouldst not have a face so fit for kissing, Nannie, if it is such a crime in one as loves thee.

'Oh, lassie, lassie! if you could know the pain I am suffering, you would forgive me what I did. Dost thou know that God used to speak to me, and now He speaks no more? I used to hear His voice, and now I hear the voices of devils. And sometimes I do not know if it is His voice or the voice of a devil. Would it not break your heart, Nannie, to fall so low as that? It was Satan bid me read to the people astead of preaching, and I did it. It was God who bid me heal yon dying man with an earthly means, and I refused and the man died. And when the morning came—oh, Nannie, if I could tell the sorrow that I sorrowed then! For it seemed as if the day of judgment was come, and the people were gathering to see the Lord judge between the false prophet and the true. Yet I did not feel the Lord's guiding hand, Nannie, as I had felt it in times past; and I did not hear His voice, and I felt as if the Lord had brought me to the Judgment Bar and had promised to be my Advocate, but had not come, and had left me to plead for myself. Till at the last I looked up and I saw the danger in the archway, and I knew that the rocks were rending, and that at a breath the whole church might topple

and fall. And I thought He said to me, "Oh thou of little faith, behold I am with thee to fulfil thy word that all men may know that thou art My servant." But, Nannie, it was Satan who spoke to me, and I thought it was the voice of God! And what the Lord meant was that I should up and give the people warning. He was trying *me* to see if I would obey Him; and I did not. And when the parson said I had sinned, I could not contradict him. But I have told you, lassie, what none other but God will ever know, how it all came about.

'Do you understand now how my heart was like to break with misery when I was there on the cliff with you? and you were sharp and unkind to me, and did talk of thy other lover, who has no right to thee, till I was nigh mad with jealousy, and love of thee, and reckless what ill things I did now I was a castaway from God. And now, lassie, I have gone forth and I know not what will come to me, and if I can keep right at all without God to guide me. And I have no comfort and no hope and no good. But if *you* would forgive me, lassie, and if *you* would help me, I think there might be hope and work for thy poor Alick yet, caring for thee! And I would know that though by reason of my sin the Lord will not have me for His prophet no more, yet He has pardoned me, and is smiling on me still, and has a favour to me, because He has given me my dear love. But if

thou wilt not, if I have sinned too bad for even *thee* to forgive me, then I am afeard to look to the future at all, for it is all black and smoke-filled, with big red clouds clashing together, and streaks of fire and rolls of thunder, and trouble in the roaring of the sea. Oh, lassie, let me speak with thee—to-day—to-morrow—speak with me, Nannie, my own—my Nannie—I have none left but only thee.'

Alick had written that letter in the hall of the Farm, whither he had come seeking Nannie. But he had found only Caroline. She was not a person of discrimination, and she saw nothing very different about him from usual. She just thought him boorish. He was uncivil not to believe her when she declared that Nannie was out.

'Well,' said Caroline, 'I can't help it. I wish you'd go away. There, write your message for the child, and I'll give it to her when she comes in. Will that do you?' She pushed the inkstand at him and left him; and Alick began a word or two, which expanded into a long letter. He was unused to writing, but expression of no sort was difficult to him, and the pen flew. The writing was crooked and blurred with his excitement, but the meaning was plain enough.

Joe lounged in, a straw in his mouth and with his usual air of good-humoured simplicity. He had not

the smallest veneration for Alick. It would be rash to say that Joe venerated any one. He regarded his cousin as some quaint performing animal, whose cleverness calls for wonder at the very time you are best convinced of his inferiority. And Joe, who took two hours to write a letter of four lines, could not conceive, even when he scratched his head for assistance, what the dickens that scribbling chap was doing so busily.

'I say,' said Joe, nudging Alick's arm, and rather frightened himself by the start the man gave on being roused from his absorption, 'if I were you, I'd cut. The parson's coming up and he's going to summons you for pulling his church down.' Alick stared stupidly at Joe, for his thoughts were all with Nannie.

'Summons?' he repeated, vaguely.

'Ay. Shut you up.' Joe burst out laughing at the look of terror that flashed over Alick's worn countenance.

'In the—the——' he stammered; but could not get out the word. 'Shut up' had come to have only one meaning for Alick.

'My word, ain't you a coward though! I'd cut if I were you, but I wouldn't look so scared,' laughed Joe, 'whether I'd done it or not.'

Alick folded his letter and directed it to Nannie, with a hurry that defeated its own object. Then

he went to the door; then returned and opened his letter, and added, this time in very irregular writing—

'I am going to hide; but at six in the morning I'll look for thee in the summer-house. For God's sake, Nannie, have mercy on me, and don't give me over to the devil. That's what it comes to.'

Then again he shut the letter with quaking fingers. He stood over the fire with it for some time. It seemed as if he were going to burn it. Joe watched him with amused curiosity.

'I see parson coming along,' said Joe.

Alick dropped the letter on the table and went out hurriedly. Joe roared with laughter. 'I think that chap's got a maggot in his head,' he said again and again.

Alick did not return home that night. Mrs. Leach was anxious but said nothing, for Alick had stayed away for a night sometimes before.

At dawn the birds saw a starved, hunted-looking creature creep slowly along to Nannie's summer-house. He looked about him as if dreading an enemy concealed somewhere. He lay down near the door of the arbour and waited. He was hungry, and chewed the rose leaves impatiently. Now and then he smiled to himself. 'She will come,' he said; for Nannie was one who never failed a trust.

After a long time, when the sun was getting high in the heavens, he raised himself on his elbow

and began to wonder why she tarried. He became aware that it was long past the appointed hour. He rose and moved to the arbour slowly. 'She must have been there all the time,' he said. He looked in. Then with a yell he started back, and fled down the garden, leaping over the low hedge out into the fields, away over the moor.

'Nothing there but the devil,' he shrieked as he fled.

No one saw him.

CHAPTER VIII

NANNIE was moved long before she had finished reading Alick's letter. She understood him so well, and knew that every word had come from the depths of his stricken soul. Not of the stern sane stuff necessary for reformers and martyrs was this poor village fanatic made. And Nannie, who understood him, discerned this. 'It will drive him wild,' she said to herself; 'some would call him wild already. Oh, poor dear Alick! I thought him wild this morning myself. Oh, why does he love me so,' cried Nannie, 'when I have no love for him!'

'I must do something,' her soliloquy went on; 'I will save him if I can. To-morrow early I will meet him. I will comfort him. I will make him listen to reason. He will hear me as he heard

when I talked to him about that poor man's death; I will take him to Mr. Bryant, and make him understand that Alick is not a hypocrite. I will tell Sir Vincent *all* about him, and he will help him.'

Just then Nannie was startled by the steps of two or three persons coming up her little stair. She recognised Caroline's voice, but who could the other people be? It sounded like John; but he was at Faverton, wasn't he? 'Oh, I do hope poor father is not very ill!' thought Nannie for the first time. 'He must be, if they have sent for John! Why are they coming to me?' Nannie was so frightened that she flung her door open before the invaders reached it, and cried distractedly, 'Oh, what is the matter? Has he sent for me? Has he heard anything?' But as John tried to kiss her Nannie reddened and turned away, saying to herself bitterly, 'He is not my brother. I have no brother and no sister and no father any more. They will hate me when they know. Father hates me already.'

John sent the women away and shut the door upon them; then threw himself upon Nannie's one little chair and stared at her: insolently, she fancied, though his thoughts of her were by no means unkind ones. Nannie stood defiantly before him, and for a long time there was silence.

At last she spoke. 'I think you are very rude,

John, coming into my room this way when I'm dressing, and taking my chair so that I have to stand. What do you want?'

'I won't go out of my way to discuss manners with you,' replied John; 'mine are farmhouse ones and mayn't be the choicest in the world; but I know this much, they are the best for me and for you. Come now, my girl, the Gov. is laid up, and like to be so for a long time, I'm afraid, and that is why I have taken the law into my own hands. You'll just do as I bid you without a fuss.'

'What do you want?'

'I want this, Nan, and mean to have it too. You just dress yourself and come down quietly and eat a bit of supper, and then away you and Maria bustle by the 9.30 from Tanswick to my house at Faverton.'

'Oh, I can't go. I have things to do at home. Let Maria take Caroline.'

'Maria is going to look after *you*. It's you, my young friend, we want to get out of the house to-night. There has been some mistake in your bringing up, it seems, and Patty's had enough of you. Come now, take it easy. We aren't going to be hard upon you, but out you must go.'

'John! John!' exclaimed Nannie, passionately, 'have you heard about me then? I meant to tell father myself! Don't turn me out like a vagabond,

John!' The young man started and seized her arm. Was this a confession? He stared at her, and Nannie's colour changed from pale to scarlet and back to white again.

'Is it true then, child? Good God!'

'Don't turn me out like a vagabond, John,' repeated Nannie. 'It wasn't my fault! I will go; but don't hunt me away to-night! Can't you bear me one day more for old time's sake?' pleaded Nannie, easily agitated in her weakness. John dropped her wrist and sank back in the chair. His heart had died within him. He had a great affection for this sister of his.

'I will put a bullet in that villain,' he said to himself.

'Nan, I promise we'll do the best we can for you. We won't be hard on you, my girl. I ain't come up to row you to-night anyhow. That'll mend nothing. But for father's sake, you must do as I bid you. I don't want his deathbed made uneasy by any disgrace, and the safest way to have no more of that is to get you away this moment. Come now,' impatiently, 'don't be an obstinate baby and haggle over three farthings, when the difference in our accounts is a thousand pounds.' Nannie was overwhelmed by finding the mistake in her parentage viewed in such a very serious light. Now they were slipping from her, she felt a great clinging

affection for these homely, yet pretentious people whose ways had often irritated her.

'John, did you say his deathbed?' she said, with quivering lips, her eyes raised pleadingly to her brother's. He nodded.

'He'll never get up again, poor old Governor,' said he; and then his feelings, getting the better of him, he exclaimed, angrily, 'It'll finish him off when he learns how *you* have served him, miss.'

'Oh, John, you are unkind!' cried Nannie, 'when it was none of my doing, and I have all the suffering!'

'If you are going to take that tone, and hold yourself up to pity — well, come, that's neither here nor there, to-night anyhow. And as it is all his fault in your opinion, you hussy, you'll be pleased to hear I mean to have it out with him, d—d scoundrel, and make him smart for it too.' And then John bit his lip and muttered under his breath, 'A confounded stupid thing that is to say to her.'

'What are you talking about?' exclaimed Nannie, suddenly, starting back from him, flushed and panting, her eyes dilating. 'A scoundrel? Who is a scoundrel?'

'Don't be a fool, Nan. Don't bandy words with me. The sooner you confess he's a scoundrel, the better. Go and dress.'

'I won't dress. I must know what you mean,' said Nannie, shaking his sleeve. John looked at her and felt a revival of hope.

'What were you talking about?' he asked, roughly drawing her to him.

'About Aunt Emma! About my not being your own sister! Oh, John, I didn't think you'd want to turn me out all of a minute for that!'

'I can't attend to that sort of infernal nonsense now,' said John. 'I want to know about Sir Vincent Leicester!'

'What about Sir Vincent Leicester?' said Nannie, throwing up her head.

'What have you to do with Sir Vincent Leicester?'

'Nothing! There!' cried Nannie, shaking his hand off, and standing before him with scarlet cheeks and blazing eyes.

'Nothing? Do you mean to lie then, miss?' shouted John.

'I never lied in my life!' said Nannie.

'I am a fool to lose my temper,' he said to himself, and addressed her more quietly. 'You were for confessing a minute ago, Nan. And we have other information. Be careful now. Do you deny that that bla—, that man has made love to you?'

Nannie sickened under this manner of question. What a distance must be between her and Sir Vincent when their love seemed necessarily to every one dishonest love! She answered firmly, meeting her brother's eye, 'Sir Vincent has never said one word to me as wasn't right—not one word as couldn't be repeated to you or to any one. Yes, John, in the sense that *you* mean, I do deny that he has made love to me.'

'I won't have it in any sense,' said John. 'But come now, Nan, I breathe freer. You gave me a fine fright, you did. Though I couldn't believe my own ears that you had gone astray.' He put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her affectionately. 'You must forgive me if I was too hot, Nannie. You put me on the wrong scent somehow, and I say I was in a blue funk.'

'You are very kind, John,' said Nannie, with a lump in her throat.

'That's a good lass. We'll have the details another time. Now I'll go and see for your supper and you make haste and get ready for the journey.'

'Oh, John,' said Nannie, 'I am very sorry to annoy you, but I cannot go to-night. You mustn't ask it.'

'Why not?'

'I—I'm tired.'

'Can't help that.' They were silent for a few minutes, looking at each other.

'You have an appointment for to-morrow, maybe?'

'Yes!'

'Very good. I will keep it for you. Tell me the time and place. I shall have great pleasure in meeting that most virtuous young gentleman for you.'

'John, you are insulting. It is not with him. I don't have appointments with him. I mean—not now.'

'Not now, indeed! Who is it with, pray?'

'Alick.'

'Alick?' John blew a long whistle. 'I don't believe it. You are trying to take me in. I see through you, miss.'

'I have told you the simple truth.'

'Alick Randle, you say? Now look here, Nannie, I am beginning to distrust you altogether. Do you mean to say you are carrying on with both these men at once?'

'I am not carrying on with anybody. I don't know what it means.'

'You seem to think me a fool, my dear. Are you engaged to Alick Randle?'

'Certainly not.'

'Have you any engagement with t'other chap?'

'No.' Nannie reddened. She felt the little ring burning her throat. But yes, she was speaking the truth; only not the whole truth. That was her property; why should she allow any one to steal it?

'With any one?'

'No.'

'Then you sha'n't be making secret appointments with young men. You shall go to Faverton.'

'John, I have had a letter from Alick. I must see him.'

'Show me the letter.' She obeyed.

'You are a nice girl to be having letters in that vein from Alick, while you are making appointments —not now of course—with Sir Vincent Leicester.'

'Alick knows about Sir Vincent.'

'Indeed. Then he is not a proper companion for you. This is waste of time, miss. You go to Faverton.'

'John, I will come to-morrow at eleven; at ten if you wish. There is *no* necessity for me to go to-night.'

'There is necessity, because we are simple people not up to dodges. You may be meditating an elopement with your sweetheart to-night, my dear. Your refusal to go means something, and I intend to have my own way.'

'I give you my word I only want to see Alick. I am frightened about Alick. I——'

'I don't choose you to see Alick in this way. You have made me suspicious of him. I won't have you compromising yourself with him or with any one.'

'Compromising myself?'

'Yes. I'll tell you this much about Alick. I understand he wishes to marry you?'

'Yes, John, but——'

'Very well. If you go meeting him in private places at uncommon hours on secret business, you'll have to marry him whether you wish it or not. Are you prepared for that?'

'I am not going to marry Alick.'

'Then you go to Faverton to-night.' He left her, turning the key on the outside.

Nannie's pride rose at this, and she opened the window and actually considered the possibility of jumping out. It was far too high.

'Besides, there is no good in being *naughty*,' she said to herself. 'Oh dear! John is like father!—so very obstinate. I suppose I must go. But oh, what will my lover think of me to run away like this, without one word of any sort to him, or waiting to see if he wishes to speak to me!' She moved about dressing herself; presently sat down and wrote to her cousin.

'My poor dear Alick!—Of course I forgive you. I only wish I could do *all* you want. *I can't*, but I

will help you all I can. I was determined to come to you to-morrow morning as you ask, but John won't let me. He has carried me off. You had better tell him as much as you can, and Sir Vincent too, and then come and speak to me at Faverton.—NANNIE.

'Dear Alick, don't despair. God is always good even when we aren't. I want to see you so.'

CHAPTER IX

'WELL, well!' cried Patty and Maria, as John came down, having resumed his jaunty air. He described jokingly his contest with Nannie.

'Do you mean there is nothing?' cried Patty; 'I thought not. I couldn't believe it of Nan.' John shrugged his shoulders.

'There is something. But as far as I can make out, not enough yet to make a regular row about. She don't come back here again, that's all. You must worm the truth out of her, Mrs. R——'

'He can follow her to Faverton!' said Patty.

'He can't do it to-day, anyhow, and she needn't stay at Faverton. But he won't follow her. Out of sight, out of mind, you know.'

'I didn't find I got rid of you that way, John,' said Mrs. Maria.

'Because I was myself,' said the husband, complacently, 'and this chap, you'll find, is *him*self. Easy pleased and good at forgetting. That's the characteristic of swells according to my experience. That was Sir Charles all over, in more than his sweetheartings which came about before my time.'

'But I don't think Sir Vincent is like that,' said Patty; 'father always says he forgets nothing.'

'I'll bet you a thousand pounds I teach him to forget Nannie,' said John. Maria suggested that if no more were in it than this, the journey might be deferred; but her husband was inexorable, and alluded to Alick.

'She's entangled pretty fast there, I suspect. I never took to that hunchy for a pretty girl like her.'

'Nor I,' said the lamentable Patty again, 'and she always says she don't want him. Father's been putting his foot in it, driving her too hard. But that Alick seems to have some hold over her too. I've told father times and times they weren't keeping company in a proper way, and he wouldn't see it. It's time it was put a stop to. I've always had my doubts about preachers,' said Patty; 'they never seem countable like respectable men.'

'Seems to me,' interposed Joe, 'that Alick's put himself out of the running by losing his wits. He looked downright silly this afternoon.'

'Had a glass of beer maybe,' said John. 'Joe's

blue ribbon prevents his knowing what a glass of beer looks like, or the man who has swallowed it. Give me some, old lady,' to his sister; 'I shall want strength to carry the rebellious woman to the train.'

Presently he and his wife went upstairs for Nannie. She was ready, making no further objection. She handed her brother the note for Alick. 'You'll give it to him, John? You'll go out at six and give it to him and talk to him?'

'I'll talk to him,' said the brother, taking the note. 'I shall read it, Nan.'

'If you must I can't help it. But promise to give it yourself, John.' He winked at his wife and promised. Much relieved by the girl's submission, John was jocular as they drove along.

'Maria's the girl for a pattern,' he said; 'I've heard folk say I'm henpecked. Well, I admit I let her get the tickets, while I sit on the boxes. She spares me the trouble. It depends on the hen. If it's a good hen, a peck is a pleasure; ain't it, Mrs. R——? Don't I say so whenever you draw blood, my girl?'

Nannie heard one word in ten. She was wishing she could explain her fears about Alick to her brother. John belonged to the class of persons who are sceptical as to anything being in the least unusual, particularly when reported by a woman. 'Mares' nests aren't in my line,' he would say, con-

temptuously, and it required to know John well before you were sure that he did not apply the epithet indiscriminately. Nannie was afraid to suggest her fears about Alick. Her brother would only sneer at him for a Methody.

'I should have to tell him exactly what happened to make him believe there was anything in it,' said Nannie, her cheeks burning at the very idea of confessing to Alick's unwelcome kisses, 'and then he would think too much of it. He would think badly of him and very likely of me too. And after all I think now perhaps I was too frightened and am exaggerating. Alick lost his temper—just rather worse than usual, because he was upset by the accident; and so was I upset, and I worried Alick, and then I got into a fright. Oh, it would be cruel to tell all that of Alick to people who don't understand him.' So she only repeated, 'Do, please, John, be very sure to see Alick, and to *notice* him as much as you can. Indeed, I have a reason.' They were the first words she had spoken; but John thought he might speak to her now.

'What was that rubbish you were talking, Nan, about—I swear I don't know what it was about!' Nannie changed colour and was silent. Oh, why was Fate so unkind to her! 'You had better not talk that fashion to other folk, if you have a right

to a character. Come now, no more cross purposes. Out with it.' Poor Nannie tried to answer.

'I meant to tell father first. Oh, John, it is such a dreadful thing!' She got it out at last, poor child, with the bitter cry of one opening the floodgates to desolation. 'I am not your sister at all! I am Mary Smith!'

'Who the devil has told you such nonsense?' said John, with a fine show of scepticism. But he raked up a number of trifles in his memory with an instinctive feeling that this was not at once to be labelled a mare's nest. Nannie had to describe how she acquired the information.

'A gentleman up at the Heights told me first. He——' John took her wrist and held it slightly twisted with a pressure which hurt her.

'Now look here, Nan. From this day forward you have nothing to do with any gentleman up at the Heights, nor with any gentleman whatever. You seem to have been under some delusion about your place, my good girl.'

Nannie took her hand away, disdaining to notice the hurt either to her wrist or to her dignity. She told all she knew, and about Mrs. Bryant also, with sorrow and bitterness. 'Oh, John, John, don't be angry with me! It isn't my fault, and I never knew till to-day. Don't be angry with me!' She wept.

'My eye!' said John, 'quench the waterworks

then. I don't believe a word of it, for my part. Don't you go spreading the story now until I've ascertained if there is anything in it.'

'Oh, do you think perhaps it isn't true?' said Nannie, with reviving hope.

John Randle was made of sterling stuff, but delicacy of speech or sentiment was not in his line. 'Cheer up, Nan,' he said. 'I sha'n't believe it without I'm forced to. But if that sort of business runs in the blood, you have the more need of a brother to lock you up, miss. Lord, now what humbugs some folks are! Mrs. Bryant! I tell you what, there'll be a jolly row if the upper crust find her out.'

'It looks to me uncommonly as if they knew more about it this time than we,' said Maria significantly, pointing to the weeping girl's delicately shaped hand nestled pleadingly into his. 'Tell us more about the gentleman, Nan.'

'No, no, don't put that into her head,' interrupted the husband quickly. 'Nan, don't cry like a baby. It shall make no difference to you anyhow. If there is anything in it at all, take my word for it, the Governor knows all about it. If he adopted you for his daughter, Nan, I guess it ain't for me to interfere with him.'

'It's the most wicked conduct I ever heard of!' exclaimed Maria.

John shrugged his shoulders. 'I don't know—under some circumstances. But look here, Nannie. It's not the kind of job I should fancy doing for my sister, so look out you never get into the position to require it.'

'If ever I am in such a position, you can remember I am not your sister,' said Nannie, haughtily.

'Hullo! Here's the train. You are my sister, Nan, to all intents and purposes, and I shall treat you as such anyway, whether you disgrace us all or not. You must remember that, my dear, whatever trouble you get into.' John spoke with emphasis and Nannie was touched.

'Oh, John, you are very kind to me. But it hurts me to have you think I ever could disgrace you. You may trust me, for I could not bear to disgrace myself, no—nor him,' said Nannie, softly.

Both John and his wife thought it very improper of her to allude to him at all. But for the present their game was truce.

PART VIII

DOUBTING CASTLE

CHAPTER I

'THE cause of your anxiety,' wrote Mr. Bryant to Lady Katharine, 'has been removed from Everwell.' The letter was about Nannie—a young woman who from the first had inspired him 'with a grave distrust'—and about Alick, whose flight left no doubt on the clergyman's mind 'that Sunday's catastrophe was largely of his contrivance.' There were also a few words of Georgina, who had gone with Mrs. Bryant to Scarborough for a week. 'The dear child was most anxious that her impulsive conduct on Sunday afternoon should not be misunderstood.'

Mr. Bryant did not send the letter without hesitation. There were sentences in it which he was aware would create a bad impression if ever 'the whole truth came to light.' But he had at present no reason to suppose that the whole truth would ever come to light, for fortune favoured him, and his foes were disappearing. Ben Randle was on his deathbed; Emma was foolish but docile; Ann Leach had informed him that she had heart-disease,

and might pop off at any moment. Though it was only in her cups that Mrs. Leach forgot which side her bread was buttered, and she had signed the pledge, Mr. Bryant felt a great wish that she would pop off; for living over even an extinct volcano is alarming. 'When we know where her son is,' reflected the clergyman, 'she shall be induced to join him. Shall I be thought ill of for ousting all these my relations-in-law? No, because I have really not ousted them, and for a man in my position to feel a little *gêne* at their propinquity is neither unnatural nor ungentlemanly. My chief difficulty at this moment is with Vincent. I fear Georgie has tried altogether too high a hand with him.' Mr. Bryant sighed. He was selecting hymns for Sunday, and his eye fell on this, one of the gems embedded in the gravel of most modern collections—

> What peaceful hours I once enjoyed!
> How sweet their memory still!
> But they have left an aching void
> The world can never fill.
>
> Return, O holy Dove! return,
> Sweet messenger of rest!
> I hate the sins that made Thee mourn,
> And drove Thee from my breast.

He sighed, hastily turning the leaves to a hymn with less meaning.

Lady Katharine, a few days later, reading Mr.

Bryant's letter to her son, naturally omitted the part concerning Nannie. Vincent was up and about again, but with a sprain and an inclination to silence. His mother was taking great delight in coddling him. 'What's all the rest of the letter?' he asked, bluntly; and Lady Katharine stupidly coloured, and said vaguely, it was about a—a young person in the village, in whom Mr. Bryant took an interest. Vincent remained a long time in what had, during these few days, become a habitual attitude with him; his hands behind his head, and thoughtful eyes fixed vacantly on the distant horizon line of the purple sea. His anxious mother would have given the world to be sure what he was thinking about. She hoped it was Georgina; but felt nearly stifled by a dread that it might be Nannie.

At the present moment Vincent was thinking of Alick. His compassion was stirred on the fallen prophet's behalf. For Alick's sake, scarcely less than for his own and Nannie's, Vincent was resolved to end his own undecided relation to the girl the very first moment he could get an opportunity of speaking to her. For it was horrible to feel that Nannie was dealing unfairly with any one, and Vincent did feel it. She was allowing two men, each in his own way, to make love to her at once; and she was encouraging them both. Since his last talk with Nannie, Vincent had spoken to Alick, and

he saw that the prophet, confident of winning the girl, was staking his very all on success, and was quite unaware that Nannie was accepting kisses from his rival. Vincent had not, of course, enlightened him; he felt, even a little indignantly, that Nannie must do so, and the sooner the better. But a fortnight had passed since the lovers had had opportunity of speech together, and Vincent could not but think, and with sinking of the heart, that their next conference would not find them exactly in the same position to each other as their last.

'But at any rate,' said Vincent, 'we will be honest with ourselves and with each other, and with other people. Nannie must make her decision.' No wonder his look was often troubled as he gazed vacantly at the sea.

However, at this moment his thoughts were chiefly of Alick, and compassionate ones. 'In the first place,' he said, slowly, 'it is not the case that Alick confessed, and I do not believe he had one thing to do with the accident. He never set up to be a Samson. It is most uncalled for in Bryant to circulate such an accusation.'

'I cannot help thinking, dear,' replied Lady Katharine, 'that you have grown lately a little captious about Mr. Bryant.' Gaining no denial, she improved the occasion. 'Dear Mr. Bryant's most ill-judged marriage has prejudiced you against him.'

'Not at all,' said Vincent, sulkily; he had begun to dislike speaking of the clergyman.

'I have learned a few particulars about his marriage. It is a warning, I am sure, to any one against being taken in by—a pretty face and that kind of thing.' Vincent's eyes came down from the horizon to his mother's countenance. He fancied that he had detected an allusion. 'Mr. Bryant's future wife was governess or something in a family of position when he, the curate, fell in love with her. It seems she was a widow; very young; pathetic she would appear to a young man like Mr. Bryant, widowed also.' Lady Katharine sighed and paused, remembering her own widowhood. 'Yes, it would be pathetic of course. He had no conception, I gather, of what very humble origin this Mrs. Grant was, till he had engaged himself too far to draw back. At least, I suppose he thought so then.

'Who told you all this, mother?'

'Dearest Georgina. I admit I questioned her, sweet girl.' Vincent's eyes went back to the purple sea line.

'You shouldn't, my dear mother, discuss these delicate matters; for either you'll drive Georgina into a corner where she'll be drawing on her imagination for her facts, or you'll be finding out something you don't want to know; perhaps, that Bryant

did not so much marry beneath him in his second nuptials as above him in his first.'

'My dear boy! Why, he belongs to the Bryants of Norfolk!'

'That is an unproved statement if you like. Why need we discuss it? It is of no consequence to me if he is the son of a reigning prince or of a railway porter. He's the parson; that's enough. And Mrs. Bryant is his wife. I don't care two straws if she *was* a governess, or a widow either. I hadn't gathered the information from Bryant, but what does it matter? May I ask, mother, while we are on this subject, what Georgina Bryant was doing in this house on Sunday?' Lady Katharine, aware of an indiscretion, answered rather fussily—

'Vincent, love, you were so pleased to see her.' The son frowned.

'Was I? I am sorry I gave you that impression. I did not make out who she was for a long time; and when I discovered, I was not pleased at all. I was excessively annoyed.'

'But, dearest, it was not Georgie's doing. It was mine.'

'Then it was curiously ill-judged of you, mother. It was calculated to suggest to her family, to the servants, and to the whole place, that Miss Bryant and I are a great deal more intimate than either of us intend ever to become.'

'I—don't altogether understand your intentions, dear; but Georgina——'

'I presume my intentions are the ones to be consulted,' said Vincent.

The timid, conscientious woman was greatly alarmed. Could he possibly be dreaming of marrying Nannie! 'My dear son, you must let me speak. I really do think in making your intentions you are bound in honour to consider— I cannot believe you one of those selfish, heartless, vain young men' (signs of impatience, but she persevered) 'who use their admitted right to take the initiative in these things, quite to the disregard of a lady's——' Vincent swung his legs off the sofa and faced his mother alarmingly—

'I am tired of these general truths. We had better speak plainly. Mother, you seem to think I am going to marry Miss Bryant. Well, I am not, as I explained to you already. You can tell her so, if you aren't afraid of hurting her feelings.'

'Vincent, you—you quite astonish me!' said the poor lady; 'you told me yourself that you intended to marry her.'

'No—I never spoke positively. I did tell you most distinctly that I had changed my mind.' Tears filled Lady Katharine's eyes; but anxiety would not let her drop the subject. She tried again—

'When a young man has deliberately encouraged a lady to exhibit a preference for himself——'

'Pray let us drop the hypothetical young man. Subsequent to one insane and happily rejected proposal, at a time when I neither knew Miss Bryant's character nor had reflected that character was of importance in a wife, I never encouraged Georgina to "exhibit" one atom of "preference."'

'Dear Vincent, you may say you have been misunderstood, but it is unquestionable that you—gave an *impression* to a number of persons, and to dear Georgie herself who is most important of all.'

'Are you sure it was not Georgina who gave the impression?' said Vincent; but his mother did not hear, and he restrained himself and kept silence.

'You know, dear, the mere fact of going out of your way to bring the Bryants here was calculated to give the impression to any one aware of your previous attentions. I am certain Georgie thought so. And then there was cordiality in your manner. She felt herself justified—I consider she was justified—in so far exhibiting a preference as to show she would accept a second offer. I only mean, dear,' continued the gentle lady, frightened and confused, 'that it is not—the sort of conduct your dear father would have approved, that you should deliberately insult Georgina by directing attention to

your admiration for her, in order that you might publicly withdraw from it.'

'Mother,' said Vincent, 'I would not submit to such expressions from any one but you, and I must request you not to repeat them.'

Lady Katharine put her handkerchief to her eyes, convinced by her son's composed indignation that she had said quite the wrong thing. It was the result, she believed, of an endeavour to please him by plain speaking; but she was altogether mistaken. She had said the wrong thing because she was dealing insincerely, and was endeavouring to gain her point by arguments that had no force even with herself. The real argument she was afraid to produce. There was a brief silence, and Vincent was moved by her penitence.

'Mother, I will admit that Bryant has not proved an altogether happy selection, and I will admit that in the earlier stages of my acquaintance with Georgina I made mistakes. But we mustn't have any more misunderstandings. You don't want me to confirm my previous blunders by a greater and a deliberate one; and I shall not marry a woman I do not love, because other people expect me to do so, or because it is asserted that by withdrawing my pretensions I am deliberately insulting a lady with whom I never had one moment's engagement.'

'Vincent, *dear*, I did not mean that!'

'No, I am sure you did not. But do you understand me now? As for Georgina, she has no claim on me for so much as an explanation. Now we have said enough about that. I want to know about Alick. Did you say he had fled? Show me Bryant's letter.' Vincent had been restive under rather much nursing, and a supposition that because he had strained his back, he was unable to eat butter for breakfast or to read to himself. He put out his hand and took the letter before Lady Katharine had the presence of mind to stop him.

'Vincent! no, no, dear! I—there is something in it I do not want you to read. Do pray give it back.'

'I beg your pardon, mother.' He returned it at once, but his eye had unintentionally lighted upon his own name, and lower down the words, 'Nannie's misconduct.' He reflected for a moment, frowning; and began to see through Lady Katharine's advocacy of the clergyman's daughter. 'Will you order the carriage, mother,' he said, 'and come out with me? I must learn particulars about Alick, and in the first instance I shall apply for them to *Nannie Randle*,' said Vincent, dwelling on the girl's name.

'Vincent, you—you surprise me!' stammered the widow, aghast.

'I have other matters upon which to speak to Nannie also,' he continued.

'But she—she has been sent away. And her father is dying——'

'Who has sent her away?' interrupted the son, sharply.

'Nannie Randle, Vincent? She has indeed. Mr. Bryant says so.'

'I must see that letter, mother,' said Vincent, after a pause.

'Indeed, love, I do not wish it.'

'Is there anything offensive to Miss Randle in it?'

'No—o.' Lady Katharine hesitated.

'Are you sure? Or to me?'

'Vincent, by your questions you admit that——'

'I understand enough of the contents of that letter to beg you to burn it, mother; now, in my presence. Miss Randle's name is not to be connected with mine, until she and I have given our consent. You can form your own inferences, mother; but you had better take care, for I shall not easily forgive you, if I find you have formed wrong ones.'

Vincent stood by the window, thinking gloomily that here was a fresh shadow fallen over the sunshine of his love. Presently he became aware that his dear mother was in tears; the reason

was not far to seek. He knelt by her chair and put his arm round her, to her unspeakable consolation.

'Mother, the time has perhaps come when, in Nannie's interest, explanation is advisable. But I must see her first. This evening, to-morrow, within a day or two, you shall, I promise you, learn all. Till then, dear mother, I must ask from you silence, and especially to other people. Will you remember one thing,' he went on, speaking slowly, in a low tone of deep feeling, 'will you remember, my dearest mother, that I shall never feel anything but the keenest regret if I have to occasion you disappointment, or at any time the smallest unhappiness?' Vincent was an essentially sincere person, as all who knew him were quick to feel. He so seldom spoke in the tone of his last sentence that when it came it was doubly impressive. Lady Katharine embraced him tearfully, and could venture no remonstrance, at least for to-day.

'Oh, if only his dear father were alive!' mourned the helpless widow, wringing her hands.

CHAPTER II

VINCENT hurried to the Farm, cursing his week's captivity, when dear Nannie was in difficulties.

'Oh, my sweet darling!' he said to himself, 'why did she not call me? Perhaps she did. Perhaps she did! and these busybodies would not allow me to hear her. The cowards! to fall upon *her!* I am certain Bryant is at the bottom of it. He has made a tool of my mother. Well, I must leave no stone unturned to set Nannie right at once. Even if I have lost her! Good heavens! what a thought! I will not exist another day without seeing her.'

For Vincent's uneasiness grew apace. It had, a fortnight ago, been a shock to the lover to find Nannie accepting a different view from his own of the possibilities of her relation to Alick, nay, clinging to it, notwithstanding his emphatically expressed warning and displeasure. He knew that Nannie had been daily with her cousin during the week preceding the accident at the church, and he had been unable to lay the suspicion that she was avoiding himself. Was she slipping away from him? Would their next meeting be to say good-bye? Hateful, intolerable thought! not merely because he loved her, and more than of old, but because he could not contemplate the idea of parting now without an agitating self-blame. For he had decoyed Nannie into a degree of 'lovering' justifiable only on the grounds that they were practically betrothed, and it was long since he had

himself taken any other view of their relationship. To be obliged to reopen the question, to admit the possibility that she might abandon him, was horrible. To lose her; to fear that he had harmed her, if ever so little; and to feel that though not distinctly blamable, still the actual Nannie was not precisely the delicate, scrupulous, and wholly trustworthy Nannie his imagination had believed — Vincent could not face the dread possibility. Once in her presence, his fears would be smiled away.

Yet there was the vague alarm, the undeveloped remorse in his heart, joined now to a sickening sense that other people had intervened with their murdering touch. He hurried to her home, for the first time openly, — 'to put her right,' even if he had lost her. 'Heaven forbid it! Oh, my treasure, we had better never have seen each other than be parted now! But no, for my own sake I cannot wish that,' said Vincent, who was not introspective, nor prone to serious reflection except as a direct incentive to action, yet who had a dim understanding that Nannie's lover, as compared with the sometime admirer of the unprincipled Georgina Bryant, breathed in a purer atmosphere, and had somehow unconsciously raised the ideals of his life.

'Well, sir,' said John, 'it's time you did step forward, for there have been remarks made about you and Nannie, and it's a question with me if she

will ever recover from the mischief you have done her.' Vincent flushed, for the words fell in all too well with the train of his own thoughts. He had reached the Farm at an unfortunate moment, for Mr. Randle had died in the early morning, and confusion and agitation reigned. John, however, looked much as usual in the rather loud costume which gave the gentleman an immediate feeling that of all men in the world he would not have picked out this one for a brother-in-law. John came promptly to interview the visitor, and opened the talk with an air of bluster which marked a fixed determination to quarrel.

'You will gain nothing by that tone,' said Vincent very quietly, however; and John, to his own surprise, found himself presently talking the matter over quite calmly, and by force of simple sincerity on both sides, arriving at a sort of warlike understanding with the enemy, and even conceiving an unwilling liking for him, which was not unreturned.

'I cannot think,' said Vincent, 'that you have acted judiciously in sending Nannie away. She had far better return at once and face boldly any gossip or misapprehension which may have arisen. When it is known that she is to be my wife, surprise will cease at our having required some previous intimate acquaintance.'

'You take it as a settled thing, sir? That is not what my sister told me.'

Vincent's heart beat, and he resisted a strong temptation to exaggerate his success.

'At least, Mr. Randle, Nannie's decision can't be postponed any longer. You see now why I must speak to her at once.'

'But I don't choose to have any more of this carrying on,' said John; 'you may have acted perfectly square by my sister, sir, but it's a game there has been enough of. I know my duty to Nannie, and my duty to you and your family, too well to help on a match which would bring you into ridicule and my sister into mortification and scorn and disappointment.' Vincent was not enough inspired by this man in the spotted tie, who had not poor Alick's passionate eloquence, to utter any protestations.

'I have not come here to argue,' he replied; 'I have come to justify Nannie in every way, taking all the responsibilities of our present position upon myself. But I wish to inform you of my intentions. I shall see your sister at the earliest opportunity and learn her decision. Whatever it is I shall abide by it. Nannie and I have not carried our intercourse so far that she is not still at liberty to dismiss me from her acquaintance; but we have gone altogether too

far for me to accept dismissal from any one but from herself.'

'Well, sir,' said John, 'I never was given to walking into traps with my eyes open. I want the thing left where it is, and if I can prevent your seeing Nannie to-day, or any other day, I'll do it.' And they parted.

Mr. John telegraphed at once to his wife, for he had seen Vincent talking to Molly, the stupid servant girl, who knew that Nannie had gone to Faverton. The telegram said, 'Mind your eye; and shift your quarters,' and John was at ease, for he had arranged with his wife that Nannie was to receive no visitors and write no unread letters, and that Faverton was to be her prison only so long as it was secure.

But Vincent was so grateful for Molly's information that he gave her a gold piece; and he went to Tanswick station and set off for Faverton at once, notwithstanding a strong desire for lunch, and a sense of great fatigue in his crippled back, which John had believed enough to keep him quiet for a day or two longer. Lady Katharine was in a state of agony about her son's health and everything else, when hour after hour passed and he did not return.

CHAPTER III

'For goodness' sake, John,' cried the distracted Patty, 'tell us what you said to him.'

'How you do go on,' said her brother, irritably. 'Did you suppose I was going to quarrel with the swell in his own house, with the Governor waiting upstairs for his coffin? (John, as observed above, had gone downstairs to Sir Vincent with every intention of quarrelling, and pretty noisily.)

'How could you *help* quarrelling with him?' said Patty, lachrymosely; 'it isn't *nice* of you, John, to be for smoothing it over because, poor father being gone, it's a matter for *you* to keep straight with Sir Vincent, and get liberal terms out of him.'

'Right you are,' said John. 'I always keep an eye to business.' He expressed admiration of Sir Vincent; 'A chap who keeps his temper, and could set a man down if he chose, and who don't say no more nor he means on any subject.'

'Well I never!' cried Patty, holding up her hands; 'just fancy if one came to being own sister to my Lady Leicester!'

'Don't be an idiot. In the first place, a nice dance we'd all be in if we brought that on. In the second, it would never come off. In the third,

it ain't desirable. We're as good as he, but the way to show we think so is by keeping our own line and not trying to get into his, like we admired it. Just teach Caroline that, will you? She's too fond of running after ladies and aping them. It's a mean spirit. Equality will never come that way. It's levelling down we want, not levelling up. I don't want young Leicester's silk hat, bless him, and Latin, and stupid Sir before his name. Little things amuse little minds. While he's got 'em, I'll make him my bow, like I do to Johnny playing a king. But I won't own none of these gents for comrades till I see 'em earning their bread like I do, and distributing their money, and using their leisure for something more productive than filling girls' heads with gimcracks. Look here now — I'd a deal sooner have married a lady myself. I'd have brought my wife down to her proper place, and there'd have been something gained. But if you girls get marrying men above you, you alter nothing. You leave your own sphere, and you never get a firm foot in the t'other. There's my views on socialism for you. You'll never see me, if I made a million, and had the biggest house in the country, trying to be a swell like Ned Bryant. He's not fish, flesh, nor fowl; and as for his wife——' John paused. 'Come here, old lady, and I'll tell you what I've heard about her. But I won't have

Caroline told, nor Joe, mind you. Caroline's jealous of Nan and would be for casting her off, and Joe would be getting sweet upon her. If you were as vain as Carry, you'd have taken her view, and if I wasn't tied fast already I might have been in Joe's danger; there's no knowing. As it is, you and me have no dust in our eyes, and can see clear enough that Nan has just got to go on as before, and be one of the family, with us responsible for her. I don't mean to budge from that position whether she turns out well or ill, and if you don't back me up, I'll be angry with you.'

'But is it true?' asked Patty, breathlessly, when she had heard about Mary Smith.

'I bet you a hundred it's true, though I don't mean to act upon it or to admit it, if I can help. The man Kane writes to me that he has got to the bottom of it at last, and is prepared to show up the persons who are to blame. Those I take it were the Governor and his precious sister, but now the old man's going into his grave we none of us want to pry into the matter. I'm going up to the Heights to see that chap Kane this evening, and shut his mouth. Nannie's a deal better off without such as he meddling with her, and it can't be nothing but a whim on his part, of a piece with the rest.'

'But if he can prove it?' said Patty.

'I'll hear what he has to say; but my advice to

him will be, "Let sleeping dogs lie." I'm not going to give up my sister, especially now when she's in a mess. Who'll see her out of it, I'd like to know, if it isn't her brothers and sisters? Now hold your stupid jaw, do. Nannie she is and Nannie she shall remain, so long as it depends on John Randle.'

Meanwhile it happened that at Tanswick station Vincent, on his way to Faverton, was talking to the station-master in the recesses of the booking-office when the Scarborough train came in; and out of it descended Mrs. Bryant and Georgina. The elder lady being in tears, looked even more homely than usual, and at the best of times she was never showy enough to be taken for so much as the beauty's maid. The vicarage pony chaise was late, and the ladies lingered by the door.

'Ah, Georgie, if ever you'd lost a brother yourself you wouldn't be so cross,' said Emma.

'If I had lost twenty brothers, I wouldn't make an exhibition of myself in a public place,' said Georgina, in a low, acid voice, which Vincent had not heard from her before. 'Oh, you needn't look to me for sympathy. The mere idea of your relations always gave me a sick headache. If you had any taste you would not parade your connection with them. Well, there is one comfort; that disgraceful Nannie, who is so like you, is put out of the way.

Shall I make papa send you after her?' And she laughed.

Vincent emerged; bowed coldly to Georgina, and handed Mrs. Bryant to her pony carriage, talking to her about her brother.

'It's pleasant to hear any one speak kindly of him, I'm sure,' said the poor woman. Georgina boiled over with fury. She looked up at him tenderly with her fine eyes.

'Vincent, don't think me a fidget. Are you all right again yourself? You limp still? And how dreadfully ill you were that Sunday!' And she looked down shyly and blushed. It required skill to act so nicely when she knew he was frowning at her.

Georgina declared she had left a shawl in the station, and got him away with her on pretence of finding it.

'Vincent,' said the girl, despairingly, 'you are angry with me. I see it. Have pity on me. It is difficult for me to remember—to realise that all is so changed between us.' Vincent was startled by the glow on Georgina's face and the tenderness in her speaking eyes. He might have been taken in, had he not overheard her remarks to the step-mother, to whom she spoke so charmingly in public. He seemed now to see the word 'Humbug' written in flaming letters upon her brow.

'I really do not understand you, Georgina,' he said, with supreme awkwardness. Georgina was struggling with tears.

'Oh, women, *faithful* women—' she paused, 'have a hard lot that they dare never for a moment show their hearts lest they be misinterpreted, and thought evil of by the very ones who——' She ended with a sort of sob and turned away. Vincent was as much embarrassed as any other young Briton who finds himself confessedly the wooed when he has only practised at wooing. His manners were not equal to the task of enduring this inversion of prerogative.

'Why do you speak to me like this?' he said, bluntly; 'it is uncalled for, and deceives neither of us.'

'I have done with her after this, thank Heaven!' thought Vincent.

'I have lost him,' thought Georgina. But she had plenty of poisoned arrows ready wherewith to cover her retreat. Only, unfortunately, his train came up before she had time to bend her bow! and he unceremoniously left her standing on the platform.

'He will not forget this,' said Georgina. 'It was my last card.'

'Oh, don't bother!' So she addressed Mrs. Bryant, getting into the carriage, and taking the

reins away from her stepmother. 'I warn you I can't be patient. You and your horrid little niece between you have ruined my prospects by your vulgarity and presumption and improper conduct, and some day I shall pay you both out.'

'Whatever do you mean, Georgie, dear?' whimpered Emma.

CHAPTER IV

'AND I thought I loved that girl once!' said Vincent to himself; 'it doesn't say much for my taste! But now I am going to take stock of my position. Before I see my heart's treasure, I must be very clear what I am going to say to her. I have gone over it all a thousand times, but never practically. I have never come to the point, and said definitely to myself and to her, "We must marry, and that immediately;" or, "We must part, at once and for ever." Before I say it, before I attempt the final persuasion (and Nannie loves me well enough to feel weight in my persuasion), I must be very sure, even at the eleventh hour, that the direction I give her intentions is the one I do honestly believe to be the best. So now to my review of our position. I love her; how much let the gods say, for I cannot. I loved her in a holiday humour

for her beauty first; but it is for far more than her mere bodily beauty that I love her now! She loves me—wonderful but true; and if we come together we shall be—for a time at least—so happy that one day will be as a thousand years, and no subsequent suffering would be too high a price to pay for our one glorious day. Is that what I dare confidently to assert to my treasure to-day?'

Vincent would have given anything to feel that perfect confidence; but he did not. He had still a sense of risk; some defined doubt of himself; a shadowy doubt of Nannie; and a recollection of the detestable axiom that Love is blind. The wandering, tiresome thoughts ran on. 'Nannie is not a lady; and I unluckily am born a gentleman. No, I mustn't emigrate. My mother will not, I fear, be a very pleasant mother-in-law. That young man with the gaiters will be offensive as a brother-in-law. My marriage will be thought insane. I shall be laughed at, which I don't like; and I shall be pitied, which I like less; Nannie will have much snubbing to go through, and probably will never attain to intimacy with ordinary gentlefolk, or to toleration by my noble relations. The point is, Do I care? Couldn't I survive some laughing and pitying and snubbing and cutting and quenching? Of course *I* could. But if it hurt *her?*

'Still, if I can't get Nannie out of my head, what is to be done? Heaven and earth! Have I the smallest intention of even trying? Now I know quite well what Henry Langton did, and what many sensible men would suggest, and what I remember I proposed to myself at one stage of the proceedings. A secret marriage seemed then a common-sense arrangement, presenting an easy solution of difficulties.' Vincent flushed all by himself in the railway carriage, and cast away that solution. 'I daresay scores of men have done it and not repented, but it would not suit me. I should be certain to wish I hadn't done it, when it came to telling my eldest son: "You are my heir, sir, and I cannot hide you if I wished it. My Nannie was very dear to me, and good enough to be my wife and your mother; but I did not think her good enough to sit at the head of my table; and your grandmother doubted her taste in bonnets." What would my son think of me, I wonder, and my estimate of proportional values? What would he think of his mother? No, no; if I cannot face the drawbacks of the position and produce her openly to the world with all the honours that are her right, by Heaven, I will let her alone.

'I suppose,' said Vincent with a sigh, 'that in some fifteen years' time it is just possible that I might

marry some one else (not Georgina), and without being rapturous might find myself sufficiently comfortable. By that time Nannie would be wed to some builder or shopkeeeper (not Alick), and if we met in the street, we should each look the other way, for fear of remembering too much, and failing in our duty to some one else. It would be all right, I suppose; only I don't fancy the position, nor a wife I could not be true to without an effort. Fifteen or twenty years' time! But what was that I heard Georgina say to Mrs. Bryant? "Your niece, Nannie, *who is so like you.*" Can that be true? Is Nannie like Mrs. Bryant? I have not noticed much resemblance. Mrs. Bryant has not Nannie's noble brow, nor that heaven in her eyes, that peace in her smile. She has not Nannie's courage, her steadfastness, her generosity, her merriment. Heavens! how merry she is!' Vincent's thoughts here ran into a siding, and he got no further in the comparison between Mrs. Bryant and her niece. What lover ever is able to picture the appearance of the beloved after the golden halo of youth and passion shall have gone, and years shall have blurred the face and sunk the figure? 'She is as much like my mother as she is like Mrs. Bryant,' said Vincent; 'surely my dear mother will be fond of my treasure when once she knows her!' Which reflection brought him back to Nannie's relations again, and to the question if he would be doing well

in persuading her to violate their wishes, supposing he could accommodate his own conscience to displeasing Lady Katharine. And Vincent sighed, and said regretfully, 'But disobedience may be no more necessary than violence. Patience and perseverance may induce that gentleman of the gaiters to consent; ay, and with secret joy and concealed alacrity. There was that in his eye which asserted pretty loudly that he is as good as we; and verily I admit that he is more than probably right. But that being his view, I suspect he would not unwillingly prove his theory by affinity with his landlord. Ye gods! I am averse to gaining the consent of Nannie's relatives, for it will entail friendliness with John and eke with Caroline.'

By this time Vincent had left the train at Henslow station; had sat for some time at the inn waiting for a horse; had encountered his grandfather, the Earl, and been lectured by him about things in general; had driven to Faverton and descended from his hired trap at the door of John Randle's pretentious and comfortable house. 'My cogitations have led to nothing new,' he said, finally, as he rang the bell; 'I never do get farther than the point from which I start. It is unsuitable; but I can't do without her. I mean to have her, for no better, but for no worse reason than this—*I love her.*' And then the words of an old song rang

through his thoughts, and he caught his breath anxiously—

'Oh dear Life! when shall it be, that mine eyes thine eyes shall see,
And in them thy mind discover,
Whether absence have had force thy remembrance to divorce
From the image of thy lover?'

'Mrs. Randle,' said the intruder, oppressed by Maria's air of alarm and agitation, 'I have seen your husband this morning, and I have come here with his knowledge to speak to Nannie. You will put no difficulty, if you please, in my way, but will be so kind as to beg that she will come to me at once.' So he breasted the waves of the Rubicon.

'Oh dear, oh dear, sir!' cried Mrs. John, 'Nannie isn't here! She has run away; and whatever my husband will say to me for letting her go, I cannot think!'

Vincent looked at the woman questioningly and was silent for a few minutes. 'She will have gone home,' he said at last. But he trembled. Yes, he had led Nannie into difficulties.

'No, sir. What she has done is this. She as good as warned me yesterday. *She has run away to her cousin Alick.*'

The gentleman's sudden pallor startled Mrs. Randle. It seemed to presage calamity. But he answered very calmly—

'Wherever she is, Nannie will not come to harm. She is not one to be distrusted.'

CHAPTER V

For the first day or two with her sister-in-law Nannie had not been uncomfortable, for she needed time to think and to regain her strength. And if she were no longer to look for her lover and to listen for his step upon the sea-shore or the sheep-tracks of Everwell, why should she care to remain there? Nannie petitioned for some stamps and letter-paper, and when Mrs. John asked her rather sharply to whom she wanted to write, the girl did not answer at once, but sat with her arms clasping her knees, looking out at the fields where in her childhood she had ridden the barebacked colts. But she had always loved Everwell and the sea far better, and had been more at home with Alick and Mrs. Leach.

'To Aunt Ann,' she replied; 'she was like a mother to me. All the boys and girls are like my own brothers and sisters.'

'Yes,' said Maria, severely, 'Patty told me you cared more for those vulgar people than for your own folk.'

'Oh, I do wish Aunt Ann had been my mother!' exclaimed Nannie, with a sudden sense that that arrangement would have saved the difficulties about Alick.

'Well, I suppose you can write to her if you wish. Only you must show me the letter. There's one stamp for you.'

'I have another letter to write,' said Nannie, blushing. Maria recaptured the stamp.

'Who's that to? If you don't say, you can't do it, Nan. It's not my doing. It's John's. I've got to read every letter you send out.'

'I think I could manage so you might read it, if you must; only I do want to write to him once.'

'To him? To that young gentleman? Nannie, aren't you ashamed?'

'No, I am not ashamed. I want to tell him I have given it up, and gone away, and am never, never, never going to see him again; and that, oh yes! I hope *she* will be fond of him and he of her! Dear Maria,' and Nannie knelt down before her sister-in-law and put her arms coaxingly round her, kissing her dress bodice, 'be a little wicked for once, and disobey John, and don't read my letter. I'll give you my word not to put one word as I oughtn't; or as would make him think I didn't mean what I was saying about giving him up; or as you mightn't see; only I can't *bear* the thought of any one but

himself reading my letter to him, even if it was only two stiff words. Do, do, Maria; just for this once, and there's an end of the whole thing, though it nearly breaks my heart to say so.'

Maria of course resisted this pleading, and overcame the impulse to kiss the delicate blue-veined face with its sad smile held up to hers.

'Then there was something more between you and Sir Vincent than you let out to John?' Nannie coloured.

'I can't remember exactly how much I told John. He flustered me by beginning about wickedness and things we had never even thought of.'

Maria smiled sneeringly. 'If you weren't such a child, Nan, you'd have known that a young gentleman—— well, no matter; only I guess the goodness came more of your doing than his. Tell me the whole thing now, Nannie.'

'There is nothing to tell; and I'll promise you one thing,' cried Nannie, with her ever ready smile, 'that I'll never, never fall in love with any other gentleman till my life's end!'

'You sha'n't write unless John gives you leave,' replied Maria, grimly.

And so my poor sorrowful Nannie waited and nursed her grief in silence. When she was alone, tears would gather in her fair eyes, and she would sit gazing at the well-stocked lawns and fertile

fields, and longing to be home at Everwell; and sometimes she stormed a little, and stamped her foot, and thought Providence unkind because it had not made her a lady, and fit to mate with the man she loved. But downstairs Nannie was neither sulky nor doleful, and Maria told her she'd give a deal for her gay nature; for Nannie was splendid with the baby; and while she was stifling in her heart the very aching thought, 'I shall never be anybody's wife; I shall never have a darling of my very own to nurse and to cuddle and to kiss, because he is like his father!' all the while she was singing in her sweet tones—

'Bye Baby Bunting, father's gone a-hunting!'

and the child was poking his fat fingers into the sunny dimples of her smiling cheeks. Maria marvelled.

'Do read me what John says in his letter,' said Nannie one day.

'Your father is much the same, Nan. John doesn't know what to make of your Dr. Verrill.'

'Oh, he is such a dear, funny man!' cried Nannie, 'and a very good clever doctor; only, you know, nobody but Alick ever thinks of doing *exactly* what he says. Please, Maria, what does John say of Alick? Nothing? I wonder at that when I asked him so particularly. John was to give him my note. Don't you remember?'

'I daresay he forgot it. It wasn't very important.'

'Maria! Why, he promised! It was important. I will write to John myself. And I will write to Alick. And if I don't hear, I must go home. Alick is very important.'

Maria wrote to her husband: 'You had best say something of that fellow in your next to keep her quiet. She is very good and I like her, and I think it's all right about the gentleman. But I see she's a flirty sort, and can't do without a sweetheart. She wants Alick after her, as she can't have the other. I'll try if I can't introduce some steady young man here to her; Adam Carter maybe.'

Nannie knew not why, but she began to be restless, and her fears about Alick returned. She missed his familiar presence. Here at Faverton she couldn't help remembering how of old she used to long for her dear brother Alick,—yes, of old in the long-ago days, when if she had walked across Faverton Park she had cared no more (to her knowledge) for young Mr. Vincent than for elderly Sir Charles himself, who had once chucked her under the chin, and had said, 'You have a bonny little daughter, farmer.'

'If only Alick hadn't mixed things up so!' sighed Nannie, thinking over her girlhood; all connected with Alick and his dependence on her. She took out poor Alick's long wild letter and read it again. 'What does he mean about going away?

Oh, I do hope he has lost that idea that God has failed him! I wish he would not turn to me so. But I do hope John gave him my letter, that he may know I have forgiven him.' Next day, however, when another despatch came from John Randle to his wife, there was still no mention of Alick.

'Oh, it is strange!' cried Nannie, 'when he is such an important person! Why, he is a great man! if he had lived in Palestine, the *kings* would have listened to his words. And one would think John had never even heard of him!'

'My dear,' replied Maria, 'ranters aren't accounted of by educated folk.' Nannie talked so much more of her cousin than of Sir Vincent, and with so much greater vehemence, that Maria believed the danger from the ranter by far the more serious; and she pooh-poohed Alick loudly, half disappointed that the girl could put the romantic gentleman aside so easily and interest herself in a vulgar Methodist.

Then came a scribble from Mrs. Leach: 'My dear, my dear, has my boy gone to get you? For he ain't been here since Sunday, and I miss you never so!'

Nannie dropped her letter in a fright. 'Oh, Maria, do let me go home! Aunt Ann wants me, and she doesn't know where Alick is! I am so

afraid there is something wrong with him. Oh, do let me go home!'

Maria said little, but she gave the girl no money, and seldom left her a minute alone. She wrote to her husband that this Alick was a bore, and that it had been all nonsense about Sir Vincent.

At last John in his conjugal correspondence alluded to the prophet. 'Nan must put that chap out of her head. I wasn't out in time to get her message to him that morning, and when I looked for him he wasn't about. He's left his mother without any means, and his workshop is closed, and he has gone off, on the spree I take it, the preaching game being up. I heard of his being seen farther down the coast playing the fool, drunk I suppose. Tell Nan I won't hear his name out of her lips again.'

'You had better read it yourself, my dear,' said Maria, and expected a storm. But the girl merely turned very white, and was long silent. Maria was relieved; congratulated herself upon the child's shallow feelings, and having great faith in the power of the palate, prepared her an extra dainty for her supper. She kissed the unresponsive Nannie, resolved to ask Adam Carter to breakfast, and wrote to John that Nan was the pattern of gentleness and never sulked.

But the girl carried Johnny into the granary, where it was quiet and sunny, and he could tumble about, happy in amusing himself; and she sat silent, her chin on her hand, and a look of settled sorrow and growing resolution on her fair young face.

When she came down to tea her mind was made up.

'Maria,' said Nannie, quietly, 'I must go home; Alick is in great trouble and misery, and I am sure he is ill. If he came to harm I should never forgive myself. Whether you and John like it or not, I must go.' Maria temporised and Nannie said little more.

But presently Mrs. John stepped into the laundry to have an explanation with an insolent laundry-maid; and the altercation took some time. Nannie had put the child to bed, and had left him, as usual, safe, rosy, and slumberous. She listened for a moment. No sound of Maria. Nannie went into her room, dressed herself, and left the house, walking slowly, as if she were doing the most natural thing in the world. As soon as she was out of sight of the windows, she ran. Her light foot was untiring and fleet. She had escaped. She was going to Alick.

CHAPTER VI

'If only I had one of the colts!' she said to herself, smiling. 'But no—people would stare.' Two women were passing her now, and she walked sedately, like any other young person going an errand at dusk. They looked at her, for Nannie was too pretty to be passed by man, woman, or child unnoticed, but they had no suspicion that she was running away. Then came a great cloud of dust along the high road, and Lord Henslow, driving himself with a friend beside him, stopped and addressed her.

'Can you tell me, my good girl, if that lane is open the whole way? I heard it was stopped in the spring.'

'There is a big hole at the end, my lord, but you can drive through the field on the left side. I did it yesterday in the spring cart.'

'Oh! Who farms those fields down there towards Faverton?'

'My brother, John Randle, my lord.'

'Thank you.' They drove on, the old man, who prided himself upon knowing all about everybody, trying to remember if he had ever heard that farmer's name before. His companion was expatiating on the young person they had consulted about the lane.

'One feels inclined to take a girl of that sort and get her up as a lady. That amount of beauty is so rare, it should not be hidden. Why, she had feature, complexion, grace, everything! None of our wives and daughters are so complete. But transplanting is too dangerous an operation for flowers of the kind. They wither at once; or, if they grow, we fancy they develop a rank odour from the fields, and after a time some one treads them down; probably the experimenter himself.'

'I never heard of such an experiment,' replied Vincent's grandfather, taking snuff.

Nannie had walked on a little flurried by this encounter. She was sorry she had disclosed her name, though, in the event of her being inquired for, it was unlikely that any one would consult Lord Henslow. But she couldn't help remembering that she, little Nannie, might have been his granddaughter-in-law. It was ridiculous to think of. Sir Vincent must have seen it. She ran on. She was nearing Henslow now, the trim village where was the railway station and the beginning of the outer world. The next place was Karley-le-Street, the market town. Nannie hoped herself unknown at either place, in spite of her peach-bloom cheeks and red hair.

'I could walk a long way in the dark,' she reflected, 'but what am I to do without money for the

train from Karley? It is three hours from Karley to Tanswick. I wonder if they would take me as goods? It would be cheaper.'

Hurrying through Henslow, she heard a sound of wheels behind her, and looked back fearfully. As sure as she was alive, it was John's smart gig and the white cob, driven frantically by one of the farm servants, Maria herself sitting by his side. In a moment they would be upon her. She had been missed, pursued, and now here she was, recaptured!

Nannie had presence of mind. Before Maria, who was short-sighted, could see her, she had darted into the church, where vespers were going on. She heard the gig thunder past, but she did not emerge. She was shaking all over with fright, and guessing her sister-in-law's movements. Maria would go straight to the station, whence the last train for Karley would dawdle off in about twenty minutes. She would, of course, suppose the runaway aiming at that. 'As I should have done if I had had one little sixpence,' said Nannie, 'but she would have caught me then. She will know I couldn't have got farther than Henslow. Oh dear! I am afraid to go on and I am afraid to stop here! What am I to do?'

Nannie lingered in the dim, religious light of the church, not listening to the wearisome young curate, who was droning the prayers. She abandoned her-

self to mere rest and reflection. Then the service abruptly ended, and the congregation dispersed all of a minute. Nannie crept out too, though the train for Karley was gone by this time. She had, in fact, lost all chance of getting on to-night at all, for the last eastward train left Karley-le-Street an hour and a half after the arrival of this little branch one, and there was now clearly no time to catch it by walking. Nannie peeped out cautiously from behind a tombstone, and descried the gig drawn up in the blacksmith's yard nearly opposite; the cob's white nose was peeping out, and Maria herself sat in the blacksmith's doorway, talking to him and keeping a sharp look-out on the road. And as it was getting dark, the blacksmith had accommodated her with a dark lantern.

'I shall never get by!' said Nannie; 'some one must have told her I went into the church.' She crept round the churchyard, but it was walled, and had only the one exit, which led to the high road.

'Whose carriage is this?' asked Nannie, idly standing beside a brougham with a pair of horses, waiting at the church door and out of sight of Maria.

'Eh, but girls are inquisitive cattle!' said the old coachman; 'would it lighten you much, my dear, to know the name of my mistress in Karley who has sent to fetch the young priest to dinner, when he's done burning incense to the Virgin? You are

just Papists here in Henslow. The priest's a pretty boy, and he's a-dressing himself in the westry, and if he don't look sharp he'll keep my missus awaiting with her dinner.'

'How long does it take to drive to Karley?' asked Nannie, patting the horses.

'Half an hour and a bit. Half an hour without the bit if the priest gives me a florin. He won't. He's poor. That's why she sends for him. She loves the poor, when they are popish that is, and young and glozing. My missus,' continued the old man, 'is one of them women what's led by priests. That's one half women; t'other half runs after soldiers. You're one of them latter, my dear, I suppose; and I been a soldier myself in my day.'

To the coachman's astonishment, Nannie knocked at the vestry door.

'Come in!' roared the curate, obviously in a fuss, and Nannie intruded as he was in the act of arranging his collar for the dinner party. His domicile was at some distance from the church, hence this slightly sacrilegious arrangement. He looked appalled by his visitor; but after a moment's embarrassment on both sides, he and she, a mere boy and girl and both with a sense of the ludicrous, involuntarily smiled and became friends at once. Then Nannie assumed an air of great dignity, and told him a story.

'I beg your pardon, sir, but I am in a difficulty, and I thought perhaps you would help me. My name is Randle; and I have been staying with my sister-in-law at Faverton. But my father lives at Everwell, beyond Tanswick, and he is ill—very ill. And I am hurrying home. I have walked in from Faverton, but the little train is gone; and now I sha'n't be able to catch the train from Karley, and I don't know what to do.'

'Dear me!' said the curate, brushing his hair, 'how unfortunate! Your parent ill. How distressing! Shall you telegraph?' he suggested, helplessly.

'No, sir,' said Nannie; 'but your driver says you are going to Karley. It is very presuming of me to ask it, but would you give me a lift into the town in your carriage?'

'The carriage! Bless me, has the carriage come already? How late I am! The Psalms were very long,' he grumbled to himself. Then he made a dash at the water-jug, knocking over the soap in his fuss. 'Good heavens! what *has* become of the towel!' he cried, in despair.

Nannie found the soap under the bookcase and the towel mixed up with the surplice, and handed them to the spiritual guide with the gravest countenance in the world. Nevertheless she was very near laughing, and so was the clergyman.

'Can I help to put your books away, sir?' she

said, solemnly; 'it is very bad to be hurried so.' It was at this moment that the young curate observed how pretty she was, and felt himself blushing.

Presently he hastened out to the grand carriage, and Nannie ran after him.

'Here, Thomas,' said the curate, waking the coachman, 'this young—young—'

'Woman,' suggested Nannie.

'—has missed her train, and wants to be set down at Karley station. That won't be much out of our way, I think. She hurries to a dying parent,' said the curate; 'will you get in, Miss—Miss—'

'Randle,' said Nannie again, and offered to go outside, trusting to a screen in the fat coachman.

'No, no. I'll go outside,' said the curate, gallantly, blushing again furiously as he sprang up beside the astonished servant.

Nannie did laugh very heartily in the depth of the soft carriage as she rolled undetected past her sister-in-law, and was borne swiftly towards Karley. 'I have become carriage company sooner than I expected,' she said to herself, remembering 'my lord' and his high stepping horses, not unlike the admirable pair that were carrying her along now.

Upon entering the town, Nannie espied a house, with a red lamp under three gilt balls, and upon the doorstep an untidy-looking woman with a

child on her arm. 'Clothes bought and sold' was inscribed upon the lamp.

'That's the very place I want,' thought the girl, and put her head out of the carriage window. 'If you please, sir, I shouldn't like to take you out of your way, I'll get down here and walk to the station.' The fat coachman drew up at once, and Nannie jumped out, 'I am, oh so much obliged, sir,' she said to the curate, and the light from a street lamp fell on her light figure and lovely face. The curate held out his hand.

'I—I—I—' he stammered, and Thomas, who did not approve the proceedings, whipped up the horses, and setting the carriage in abrupt motion, cut short the curate's remark. The latter could not help wishing his rich and amiable hostess was as young and pretty as the mysterious wayfarer whom he had brought to Karley.

CHAPTER VII

'I AM not, I hope, too late to do some business,' said Nannie; and presently found herself in a very untidy and ill-lighted den, where was a strong odour of ancient garments, stale tobacco, and fresh onions. I want five and threepence for the train, and I hope

I have something you can take so as to give it to me.'

'You have some "jools" maybe to dispose on,' said the woman apathetically, but studying her visitor all the same.

'No; but I have my dress. It is a good one. What will you give me for it?'

'You can't go without a dress, my lamb. Whatever would your ma say?'

'I can go without a dress if you can sell me some sort of tidy jacket, for I have a good fishing petticoat underneath. Only you must be quick, for the train won't wait. See, it is a good useful dress and not ugly.'

'No, it ain't ugly; but then it ain't a bit stylish. I can do with it for five and threepence, if you are sure I won't have trouble from your ma.'

'And you'll give me the jacket in,' said Nannie, who knew she was being cheated.

'No, not in. Here's one you can have for a shilling, that'll fit you.'

'But I haven't got a shilling, and my dress is worth more than that.'

'There's your hat ribbon; it's worth ninepence; that'll do.'

'Well, I have no time for bargaining. Yes, you can have the ribbon, for I hate it. Here, give me the money and I'll take off my dress. Five and

sixpence you might give me, for I am hungry, and I should like threepence to take to that eating-shop there.'

'Well, I won't be hard on you for threepence. Are you a servant turned off your place?'

'Oh!' exclaimed Nannie, suddenly, 'I don't think I can do it! I never came so low as to wear other folk's clothes! This jacket is dreadful!'

'It's clean,' said the woman, eyeing Nannie's gray stuff dress covetously. 'I had it off a very decent body who died of a cough last week.'

'Take it away!' cried Nannie, horrified.

'Here, father,' called the woman, feeding her baby, 'here's a young person wants five and threepence and won't part with her gown. Come and serve her, will you?' A man with a pipe in the corner of his mouth appeared.

'I am afraid I have nothing else worth so much,' said Nannie, wishing herself away.

He turned her round as if she were a lay figure, Nannie submissive, but defiant and rather frightened.

'If your hair warn't red I'd have that,' said the man; 'it ain't bad otherwise.'

'Be quick, if you please,' said Nannie, haughtily.

'I'll give you the jacket in,' called the woman; 'I don't mind that gown of yourn so much.'

'Stop a bit, stop a bit,' said the man, 'don't you hurry, missus. Here's a summat. You've a jool

here. I'll give you six shillings for it at a pinch.'

'No, thank you,' said Nannie, coldly. But she blushed very hot indeed, and put her hand over Vincent's ring.

'Ten shillings then. Who gave it to you?'

'Here, I'll have the old jacket,' said Nannie, turning to the woman; 'beggars mustn't be choosers. Where can I take my dress off, ma'am?'

'I say now, what be you after?' said the man, 'you don't look like a beggar. I say, look 'ee here. Pop the jool. You shall get it back afore your sweetheart knows.'

'My boots!' exclaimed Nannie, suddenly holding out her foot to the woman; 'will you give me five and threepence for my boots?'

'No; they haven't "louis quince" heels and are rubbed at the seams. We haven't no old ones your small size neither.'

'My boots and stockings. They are good woollen stockings. I knitted them myself. And they are nearly new.' And she sat on the counter with her trim ankles stuck out for approval.

'I wouldn't mind them stockings for myself, Bill,' said the woman, 'and the boots might fit Florrie. We'll be having the Board down on us if we keep her from school for ever.'

Nannie had bared her feet in a moment, relieved

by an alternative to the jacket, that had belonged to a cough and a corpse.

'I never see such a gal!' said the woman, producing the money.

Nannie tucked her little white feet up under her as she sat in the train, and remembered that *he* had said they were pretty. 'Sell my red hair, indeed, when *he* liked it! Oh, if it was for *his* sake I was going barefoot, how happy I should be! But there never is anything I can do for him, though I love him so. He is too great to want anything *I* can do. I would cut my right hand off for him; I would indeed. But I am only allowed to help Alick. I am only able to help Alick.'

Oh, how fresh the salt air at Tanswick felt to Nannie, when late in the autumn night she descended at the roadside station! It was her home, this wild district; she had loved no other place. There was a bright moon, which glittered on the sea, and shone upon the wayside stones and the roofs of the Tanswick cottages. Nannie's little hurrying feet gleamed white as they twinkled under her dark skirts. The tide was high, still plashing sullenly against the cliffs. She paused once to listen to the wavelets, which were eating away the crumbling rocks; as surely, though less conspicuously, than their stormy brethren, which had brought down the

crashing boulders a fortnight ago. What was the use of resistance? Nothing could check the advancing might of ocean,—washing down a few crumbs of sand and clay hour by hour, eating out the heart of the cliff, till in the day of violence there was no power of resistance left, and the stubborn rock could only break and fall.

'Oh, what have I done?' murmured the girl. 'Alick has been wearing away at me year by year, and I have let him, and I have yielded to him, an inch here and a yard there, till some day he will ask for all, and I shall find no way of escape. A dreadful weight and burden has been laid upon me, for I have to help and to save him, and perhaps there is only the one way it can be done. For it is all, all ended and over now between my dear lover and me, and he told me himself I must choose between him and Alick. And have I not chosen Alick? Have I not had to choose Alick? And perhaps it will be necessary, and the best thing for us all, and the best hope for him, if I— Perhaps it will come to that. Perhaps it will come to that!' And she wept and implored Fortune's pity, but there was only the moon and the waves and the wild sea-birds to hear her; and all the while her bare little feet were carrying her on to Aunt Ann and the children and her poor Alick, who would think she had come to yield herself to him.

Till she was nearing Everwell; when her heart failed at the thought of entering, and her sobs shook her poor, tired frame, and her eyes were blinded so that she could no longer see her path. Not yet—not yet could she go down the narrow steepness of the village lane, creeping along silently with bare feet, like a guilty thing, frightened at her own shadow upon Alick's threshold. Not yet could she leave the stillness, and the loneliness, and the truce-making night. Wandering about like this in the moonlight, no one knew where she was, and she was still free. Vincent's ring was still burning her throat, though its meaning was almost gone; and Alick did not yet know that she had come,—and perhaps to be his slave.

She turned and lingered long about the Heights, hoping desperately that her lover might see her and come out, if only to bid her good-bye for ever, and to listen to her sobbing tale of woe. But the old house was fast asleep by this time, and how could he know that she whom he loved best was outside, lonely and weary and sorrowful, wanting him? Had he come to her then, much of the future had been different, both immediately and in the months and years to come—different, and for some, perhaps, better, and for some, perhaps, worse. Possibly Fortune hesitated before she threw the cruel die of that hour. Perhaps the rousing hand already

trembled over the sleeper's head ready to unseal his ears to the sob below his window-pane, to open his eyes to the yearning hands stretched out to implore his help. And perhaps the unseen Power questioned even painfully with herself whether after all the hour of these lovers had not come, and the love of each were not chastened enough, and true enough, and strong enough to be given its will, and to be henceforward a continuous blessing to the hearts and lives of both. And perhaps, alas! the unerring dispenser of Fate still misdoubted one of them, the man or the woman; or misdoubted even both; their courage or their constancy, their generosity or their wisdom, or their perfect faith. For sadly often is even the best of us, when tried in the balance, found to be, if but a very little, still, for perfection—wanting.

The awakening touch on the sleeper never fell, and presently the invisible hand led the weeping girl hopelessly away; calling out bitterly against that Fortune which it seemed had wholly turned against her now. It is the hardest task in the world to justify to men the ways and the wisdom of Fortune.

'Vostro saver non ha contrasto a lei;
Ella provvede, giudica, e persegue
Suo regno, come il loro gli altri Dei.
Le sue permutazion non hanno triegue:
Necessità la fa esser veloce;
Si spesso vien chi vicenda consegue.

Quest' è colei, ch'è tanto posta in croce,
Pur da color, che le dovrian dar lode,
Dandole biasmo a torto e mala voce.
Ma ella s'è beata, e ciò non ode ;
Con l'altre prime creature lieta
Volve sua spera e beata si gode.'

What need to tell Nannie's further wanderings that night? Her goal was sure, and it was only a question of when she reached it.

At three o'clock, her bleeding feet noiseless on the cobblestones, she came to Mrs. Leach's door, and sat on the threshold, and had one last long sob before going in and beginning the work that had called her home to Everwell. In a moment she would knock at the door and waken the house, and ask them to take her in. And she pictured Alick —the light sleeper—the sorrowful keeper of vigils —hearing her summons the first, opening to her, seizing her and clasping her to his heart. 'Nannie, Nannie! my faithful Nannie! She has come!' And she would weep and would not allow herself to turn away. 'Oh yes, Alick. Dear forsaken, wounded Alick! I am here. I have forgiven. I have come.'

CHAPTER VIII

After a few moments Nannie became aware that this house was still awake; and before she could surmise what this could mean, Sally, dressed, tired, and tearful, with Jimmy in her arms, heavy with sleep, looked out at the door.

'You are standing on my toe, Sally!' protested Nannie, nearly smothered by kisses; 'and look, I have no shoes on, and you have great naily boots! Whatever is the matter that you are all up so late?'

'We been praying for yo, Nan. We'll be getting Alick back next. Come in, Nannie, do. Dearie, will you ask mother to let *some* of us go to bed? Polly's fallen twice on the floor, like him Paul broke the neck of, and mother just sats her oop again with a shake. She ain't *old* enough to pray the whole night through, even if she cared about Alick, which she don't. Mother's a wonderful hard woman to manage, Nan; you never know how religion nor anything will take her. She's been looking awful green in the face this last half hour, and I feel myself that a deal of fervent praying at once is like a tossing on the sey in a boät. That's why I came out to get a sup of air.'

Nannie pushed past her cousin and went into the parlour, where she found several persons assembled. The scene had something piteous in it, regarded as a survival of Alick's short spiritual reign, and his prayer meetings largely attended and keenly relished. Most of those who had clustered round the hungry-eyed prophet, hanging on his lips, thrilled by his touch, obedient to the workings of his soul, had to-day been drinking in the beer-house and making obscene jests at his name. But here and there were a few faithful disciples, who, if they were in despair about their ruined prophet, had yet retained some hold upon his teaching. And one such was his mother, poor Mrs. Leach.

The round table with the children's school prizes had been pushed aside, and the widow and her children were on their knees upon the floor. Mrs. Leach, her grizzling hair hanging over her wet cheek, was in the middle of the room, supporting herself by the weeping Lizzie and the less rebellious of the two boys (for Tom was off with the Restoration rioters). Little Mary Anne was too sleepy to cry, but her pretty face had black rivers all over it, her weary head was rolling from side to side and her form swaying, while with desperate hands she clung pitifully to the tablecloth. The baker's wife and the faithful Samuel Dykes were present also, and apparently in fairly good condition. The scene

was grotesque of course, but Nannie could not smile at it.

'Mother, for pity's sake, break off a minute,' said Sally, looking in. 'Nannie has come.' The baker's wife rolled to her feet, and the children jumped up with an air of relief; but Mr. Dykes shook his fist at Nannie, and Mrs. Leach held down the struggling Lizzie and Charlie, and continued her address to the Almighty without change, except that, from petition for the restoration of her poor boy, she passed in the one sentence to thanksgiving for the seasonable arrival of that blessed angel, her poor boy's beloved, who was the wholesome and handsome and feeling young wife appointed for him by Heaven. It was going a step too far, and Nannie interrupted—

'Auntie dear! I think baby will take fits lying with his head to the fire. There, Lizzie, carry him away. Wake up, Polly, and run off too! It's bedtime now. And tell Sally to leave somewhere a corner for me. Let Charlie go, auntie.' And Nannie forcibly removed the detaining hand. Mrs. Leach, ever an actress, fell forward in a heap on the table, all the while continuing her eloquent address to the Invisible.

'Nannie,' said Lizzie, who was almost in hysterics, 'as sure as I'm alive, mother has gone crazy.'

An altercation between Nannie and Mr. Dykes, however, brought Mrs. Leach to her senses. She

started to her feet in the middle of a sentence and said quite cheerfully—

'It's borne in upon me, from the Spirit, that there is such a thing as wearying the Almighty, and I was maybey over hasty in summoning an all-night assembly.' Whereupon she pushed them all out, and then fell delightedly into Nannie's arms, and asked what had become of her shoes. 'And I do believe I am going to swoon for the pleasure of seeing you, my angel. Don't you think, Nannie, a drop of summat would have been good—if I hadn't taken the pledge—to keep off swooning?'

'No, auntie, I don't,' laughed Nannie, and put Mrs. Leach in the arm-chair, she herself kneeling by her side with her arms round her.

'I have found a sort of benefit in the pledge,' reflected Mrs. Leach. 'My dear, my dear, you'll have to get my blessed boy to sign the pledge himself, leastways till he has a hold of the Spirit again.'

'Has Alick been drinking, auntie dear?'

'I don't know, Nan. I don't know what he hasn't been doing. But I saw him yesterday, my dear, and God knows what he had on his mind. It ain't the kind of drunkenness I have experience of. "Ann," that's what Jim Leach used to say, "there never was a pleasanter woman than yourself when you have a drop in you." But it don't seem to take Alick *so*.'

'Aunt Ann, where did you see Alick yesterday?'

'In the workshop, Nan, like natural; though we han't seen him since the church had the fit, and no one in the villages could tell us nought but silly scraps of him. And you gone, my lovey. And your father like to die to-night; and John, your brother, as bad-natured a young man as there is; and Bryant all talk, and an ill sort of talk too; and poor Emma not a woman of sense; and all the children took crazy with fright about nothing. Oh, my dear, my dear, the trouble I've been in!'

'Didn't you speak to Alick, Aunt Ann?'

'My dear, I talked a deal, but Alick never said nothing. It's his head as does it, Nan.'

'I'm afraid so, aunt. You remember what Sir Vincent feared for him?'

'La now, Nannie!' exclaimed Mrs. Leach, 'that's the silliest young man as ever I see! Alick's no more wrong than me, only his head's a queer un, specially if he gets into trouble. He mustn't have trouble; that's all.'

'Auntie, dear, Sir Vincent meant no more by what he said of Alick than that, that he goes queer now and then. I believe he would be all right if he was happy and quiet. All that preaching was too exciting.'

'But, Nan, you mustn't make queerness an excuse for not making him happy. It ain't of a

kind to make a bad husband. He don't go stupid or muddling, or throw knives at folk, like Mrs. Line's young man, acause the kettle boiled over. I wouldn't deceive you, Nan.'

'I'm not afraid of Alick, aunt. I was always able to bring him to reason with a little patience. I don't count a few thumps and pinches such as I don't think other men give their sweethearts.'

'He have pinched me too sometimes. He ain't *very* good-tempered. Men aren't, saving Jim Leach; if you are waiting for a second Jim Leach, Nannie, you'll die a maid.'

'I wish I might.'

'My dear, to the end of my days I shall feel as there's summat disgraceful in an old maid. I should never have thought you the lass to mind a pinch or two, Nannie, for reason's sake. Maybe he was jealous of thee?'

'He was.'

'And maybe you gave him reason, Nan?'

'Maybe I did.'

'It doesn't follow as he'd be jealous without reason.'

'Oh, I know he wouldn't. That is not it.'

'Then what is it, my dear? You are of an age to be married now, and you haven't any other young man. I never was one for waiting when I had a good offer. "Sally, my dear," I says to her, "if ever

you have a young man as is well-to-do, and a good workman, and honest and religious and thought on by rich and poor; and has an ugly thumb belike, or a cut lip or suchlike, don't you be waiting for one with straighter fingers or bigger moustaches. Girls who do that are like to end single, as they began. The men can't abide such particular women." Maybe it's Alick's shoulder you can't stomach?'

'No, aunt, I could do with his shoulder. Let us not talk of it any more till we have found him and got him like himself again. I couldn't be so disrespectful to myself as to marry him while he's tramping the country and making people think him tipsy, or wild, or worse.'

'Oh, my dear, my dear, do pray the Lord to take pride out of your heart. Pride is a wicked thing, Nannie. And it's all love to you has misguided him. And I cannot believe you'd have come back alone, in the middle of the night, and never a shoe to your foot, without you was sorry for your teasing and meant to marry him!' The girl rose; she had turned pale, but she spoke quietly.

'No, aunt, I have not come back sure I will marry Alick. Of course I've been thinking of it. It is not pleasant for a woman to feel she is driving a good man wild for love of her. I wish I *could* make Alick happy. I love him very much in some ways, but I can't be sure I could marry him. I

care about myself too a little, and I know I should not be happy with Alick as his wife. Alick himself would repent having got me, if he found I didn't love him, but loved some one else better, and was always fretting that I couldn't be with *him*, and half wishing to run away to *him*. Some women, when they are married to men they do not love best, find they cannot bear it, and they do run away, and bring great shame and misery on their husbands. How can I be sure I am stronger and better than all the women who have done that? I am too fond of Alick and too careful of myself to marry him if I thought there was any chance of its ending *so*.'

'But, my dear,' said Mrs. Leach, much bewildered, 'you are a respectable girl, and you have no young man but Alick.'

'That is true enough,' said Nannie, wearily. Mrs. Leach went to bed in a very comforted and pious frame of mind. But Nannie was not yet allowed her hard-won rest; for when she had climbed the steep stair, with the intention of creeping into her old place in Sally's bed, she found the three elder children still up and waiting for her with anxious faces, showing the relief they felt at the arrival of a capable elder. They also had to be comforted.

'Nannie, dost thou think mother has gone crazy?' said poor frightened Lizzie.

'Liz must be crazed herself,' said the boy, 'for she's sartain every one else is.'

'Well, she's had a scare,' said Sally; 'it ain't unnatural. Nannie, dost thou think Alick is crazy?' she asked in a low voice, clasping her cousin's arm convulsively. Nannie looked at the frightened childish faces, and felt that her fears must be kept to herself.

'Well, I'm going to bed!' said Nannie. 'I'm determined *I* won't go crazy anyhow.' And then they all clustered round her and pleaded,

'Nannie, do, do marry Alick, and then it will all come right.'

'But I'm such a May-pole!' said Nannie; 'why must I have all the weight on my shoulders? I am sure, Sally, I'd never cry if I was as big and strong as you!'

'La, Nan! you are the merriest dear!' said Sarah, affectionately, and soon the big girl and all her brothers and sisters and their mother were fast asleep, while Nannie watched on.

'I won't think,' she said to herself. 'I'll say the tables, and fancy sheep jumping through a fence, and listen to my breathing. I *will* sleep. It will be time enough to think to-morrow. I'll find Alick; and to-morrow is the day when he told me long ago he would ask me again. I had forgotten it; but I am quite sure he has not forgotten. And when he asks me——

'No, I won't think. Good-night, Myself. If you open your ugly eyes again, I will stick hairpins into them. You shall go to sleep, Myself, so as to be strong and able to laugh to-morrow, and to cheer people up. It seems you have been sent into the world to do that! Twice one are two; twice two are four; twice three are six. I am not sleepy yet. Twice four are eight. Oh dear, I do wish I could go to sleep! and sleep, and sleep, and sleep, and never wake up any more ever again.'

END OF VOL. II

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